

Reverberations of a Marital Education Program: The Moderators' Perception¹

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Abstract: This study aims to know the perception of the professionals who coordinated the marital education program *Living as partners: Turning challenges into opportunities (Viver a dois: Compartilhando este desafio)* about the reverberations of the program in the participating couples. Group interviews were conducted with ten teams of professionals who conducted workshops of the program, totaling 28 participants. Data were analyzed using Thematic Analysis, with the support of NVivo software. The themes show that the couples presented reactions of both receptivity and reluctance to certain activities. It is evidenced that the relationship established between the couples produces reflection and learning. It is perceived that marital education programs may extend the perspectives of marital life, as well as enhance the closeness between couples and improve their conflict resolution strategies.

Keywords: marital relations, marital conflict, health promotion, psychosocial intervention

Reverberações de um Programa de Educação Conjugal: A Percepção dos Moderadores

Resumo: Este estudo tem como objetivo conhecer a percepção dos profissionais que coordenaram o programa de educação conjugal *Viver a dois: Compartilhando este desafio* acerca da sua reverberação nos casais participantes. Foram realizadas entrevistas em grupo com dez equipes de profissionais que conduziram as oficinas do programa *Viver a dois*, totalizando 28 participantes. Os dados foram analisados por meio de Análise Temática no *software* NVivo. Os temas identificados demonstram que os casais apresentam tanto reações de receptividade à proposta quanto de relutância a determinadas atividades. Evidencia-se a importância da relação estabelecida entre os casais do grupo, pois esta gera reflexão e aprendizado. Percebe-se que atividades de educação conjugal têm o poder de ampliar as perspectivas sobre a vida a dois, bem como a proximidade entre os casais e a melhora nas estratégias de resolução de seus conflitos.

Palavras-chave: relações conjugais, conflito conjugal, promoção de saúde, intervenção psicossocial

Reverberaciones de un Programa de Educación Conyugal: La Percepción de los Moderadores

Resumen: Este estudio tiene como objetivo conocer la percepción de los profesionales que coordinaron el programa de educación conyugal *Vivir en Pareja: El arte de enfrentar los conflictos* sobre las reverberaciones de este programa en las parejas participantes. Se ha hecho entrevistas en grupo con diez equipos de profesionales que han coordinado los talleres del programa. Los datos fueron analizados mediante el Análisis Temático en el *software* NVivo. Las percepciones de los profesionales fueron que las parejas presentaron tanto reacciones de receptividad a la propuesta, como de evitación a determinadas actividades. Se destaca la importancia de la relación establecida entre las parejas del grupo, la cual ha favorecido reflexión y aprendizaje. Se percibe que actividades de educación conyugal tienen el poder de ampliar las perspectivas sobre la vida en pareja, así como la proximidad entre las parejas y la mejora en las estrategias de resolución de sus conflictos.

Palabras clave: relaciones conyugales, conflicto marital, promoción de la salud, intervención psicossocial

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Daily coexistence in a relationship presents couples with innumerable challenges, related to balancing individual and conjugal demands, besides family-related, professional and social questions. In spite of this, the option to live together is increasingly related to satisfaction regarding the relationship. The ease of legally obtaining a divorce, associated with the cultural valuing of individual happiness and well-being, means that the people who remain in relationships are those who find moderate to high levels of satisfaction there (Mosmann et al., 2015).

Studies with couples in long-term relationships have corroborated this perception. The conjugal satisfaction ascertained in these couples is related to closeness and cohesion, with the use of appropriate strategies for resolving problems and with communication skills (Norgren, Souza, Kaslow, Hammerschmidt, & Sharlin, 2004). Furthermore, couples who remain together after decades indicate that the relationship tends to improve with time, as coexistence, maturity and trial-and-error experiences allow them to learn more constructive ways for managing conflicts (Costa & Mosmann, 2015). These findings support the indications of Systemic-Structural Theory, which indicates the influence of various factors for forming the structure of the conjugal subsystem, such as the biological inheritance of each spouse, the sociocultural context, casual events which have impacted on the couple's life and the decisions taken by the spouses about how to deal with all these aspects (Simon, 2008).

Some authors define the variables which influence loving relationships according to the possibilities for change (Halford, Markman, Kline, & Stanley, 2003). In this perspective, on the one hand, one finds static indicators – those which are unlikely to be modified over time, such as – for example – style of attachment of each spouse, the relational model originating from their families of origin, and the occurrence of events in their life cycles. On the other hand, the dynamic factors are those which can be modified over time, such as how they communicate and their conflict resolution strategies (Halford et al., 2003).

Although it is not possible to modify the static indicators, studies have shown that changes in the dynamic factors can control the adverse effects associated with these (Shapiro, Gottman, & Carrère, 2000). For example, studies have evidenced that individuals with insecure attachment style tend to have a lesser conjugal quality, while those with a secure attachment style report high levels of quality in the relationship (Scheeren, Delatorre, Neumann, & Wagner, 2015). Nevertheless, people with an insecure attachment style tend to present improvements in the level of conjugal quality when they use positive strategies for resolving conflicts (Scheeren, Vieira, Goulart, & Wagner, 2014). These results indicate that, regardless of the attachment style, learning constructive strategies for managing conflicts can constitute a protective factor for the conjugal relationship.

It is to this end that couple relationship education programs operate. Their purpose is to encourage couples to learn dynamic factors, focusing on the necessary skills for maintaining the quality of the marital relationship (Halford et al., 2003). In this regard, marital education may be defined as a set of strategies aimed at promoting the improvement of loving relationships and encouraging healthier, more satisfactory and stable relationships (Halford & Bodenmann, 2013).

In the literature, there is a large corpus of investigations on the efficacy of these actions, as may be observed in the review of Neumann, Mosmann and Wagner (2015). The main results identified in the studies are improvements in the rates of marital quality (Whitton, Weitbrecht, Kuryluk, & Hutsell, 2016), in communication skills (Rhoades, 2015), in conflict management (Carroll & Doherty, 2003) and in commitment to

the relationship (Stanley, Amato, Johnson, & Markman, 2006).

These programs have existed for over 30 years in the United States, and have also been widely used in countries such as Australia (Halford & Simons, 2005) and Germany (Baucom, Hahlweg, Atkins, Engl, & Thurmaier, 2006). In Brazil, a few records were found in the literature about specific actions for marital education. Scorsolini-Comin (2014) presents one as-yet theoretical initiative in this regard. Through a bibliographic review, the author sought to identify the elements that could make up a future marital counseling intervention, within the scope of marital education. Equally, Bolsoni-Silva, Nogueira and Santos (2014) have described – based on a single case – the application and results of a structured group intervention that worked on the functional relationships between the couple, communication, the expression of affection and resolution of problems. Juras and Costa (2017) present the initial phase of a study that proposes a group psychosocial intervention with separated mothers and fathers with small children, but does not provide details of the intervention proposed. In a clinical perspective, a report was found of two interventions lasting a single session developed according to the cognitive-behavioral perspective, one of which was geared towards raising the couple's awareness of patterns of communication, and the other of which focused on presenting a model for resolving problems (Silva & Vandenbergh, 2009).

One recent initiative which sought to meet the demand for interventions geared toward the prevention of marital ill health and the promotion of marital health is the *Living as partners: Turning challenges into opportunities - Psychoeducational Program for Couples*. Developed based on empirical studies, it aims to encourage the couples to extend the range of strategies used in coping with their conflicts (Wagner et al., 2015). The program is composed of six workshops undertaken in groups of 4 to 8 couples, meeting once a week. The topics addressed by the program are marital myths, marital conflict (topics, frequency, intensity and resolution strategies), sexuality and leisure together. Its operationalization involves the couples' active participation through interactive and play-based tasks, undertaken both between the marital dyads, or with all the couples together. Besides this, the workshops include psychoeducational elements, directed towards explaining theoretical aspects which can add knowledge with practical applications for their lives together. In this regard, although involving group work, the workshops preserve aspects of the couples' intimacy. The activities are led by higher education professionals, based in the Manual which explains each workshop step-by-step.

Considering the panorama presented regarding the investment in conjugal relationships in Brazil, as well as the complexity of variables which make up conjugality, strategies that contribute to promoting marital health have great relevance in the current scenario. As few marital education interventions are found in the Brazilian literature, it is understood that extending studies assessing the functioning and effects of these actions could contribute to developing the field as a whole. In this regard, the study is underway investigating the efficiency indicators of the 'Living as

partners: Turning challenges into opportunities' program. The present article incorporates this study in a qualitative perspective, giving a voice to the professionals who ran the program. With this in mind, the aim was to investigate the perception of the professionals who coordinated the *Living as partners: Turning challenges into opportunities* marital education program regarding the program's reverberation in the couples who participated.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were 28 female professionals who ran the *Living as partners* program in 10 groups of couples, covering a total of 65 heterosexual couples. The professionals worked in teams made up of three members, organized according to the following roles: (a) Moderators: professionals who coordinated the workshops; (b) Assistants: professionals who assisted the moderators in the coordination; and (c) Observers: professionals who observed the running of the workshops. Among the participants, 10 were moderators, 9 were assistants and 9 were observers. One assistant and one observer were unable to be present on the day of the interview.

The teams worked in places such as health departments, Social Assistance Reference Centers (CRAS), Specialized Reference Center for Social Assistance (CREAS), family and couple therapy training centers, and universities. The professionals who made up these teams already knew of the *Living as partners* program and had shown interest in undertaking the program in their work contexts. In this regard, the selection of the teams by the researchers was undertaken by convenience, so long as the same met the following inclusion criteria: (a) agreement on the part of the workplace, represented by approval from local managers. As the program was offered as a partnership between the researchers' institute of origin and each one of the places mentioned above, approval from the managers was necessary for the teams' participation and the provision of physical space; (b) participation in training on the *Living as partners* program, lasting 10 hours. This training was undertaken in person and was coordinated by the researchers who developed the program and coordinated this study; and (c) agreement with the research procedures. The teams who met these requirements were made up only of women, due to what was possible for the workplaces and to the professionals' interest.

All of the moderators had been educated to degree level and nine of them either had, or were working towards, postgraduate qualifications. Nine were psychologists and one was an educationalist. Their mean age was 36 years old ($SD = 10.35$). The assistants and observers were educated to degree level (57.8% $n = 11$) or were undergraduate students (42.1%, $n = 8$), working in the areas of psychology, social work, nursing or public management. The mean ages were 33 years old for the assistants ($SD = 6.27$) and 29 years old for the observers ($SD = 10.38$).

The couples who participated in the program were either linked to the locales (e.g. CREAS service users), or came from the general community. Each locale took responsibility for

publicizing the program to the community through the means available to it in its context. Among the strategies used there were active techniques of publicity, such as personal publicity and making people aware of it through face-to-face contact by community health workers, and passive techniques, such as the use of leaflets and publicity on the radio, in newspapers/magazines and on social networks (Carlson, Daire, & Bai, 2014). The couples who expressed interest in participating in the program made contact with the locales in order to enroll. The program was offered free of charge.

As a result, the couples who participated came from five cities in the South of Brazil. In percentage terms, 50.8% ($n = 66$) of the participants lived in a major city or in a metropolitan region, 20% ($n = 26$) lived in cities in the rural regions with over 100,000 inhabitants, and 29.2% ($n = 38$) lived in cities in the rural regions with up to 20,000 inhabitants. The male participants' mean age was 37.31 years old ($SD = 11.26$) and the women's was 35.62 years old ($SD = 11.13$). The majority of participants (63%, $n = 82$) had some level of education at higher level, followed by 23.9% ($n = 31$) who had completed Senior High School.

Instruments

A group interview with an exploratory character was undertaken (Fontana & Frey, 2005) with each coordinating team. The group interview consisted of questioning more than one individual simultaneously, and can be used for assessing experiences shared by the members of the group (Fontana & Frey, 2005). As the three members of the team participated in the workshops together, the group interview was chosen to provide an opportunity for joint construction of the data. This formative interview allows the individual responses to be developed based on the responses of the other participants, making it possible for interviewees to complement and enrich the production of the information (Fontana & Frey, 2005). This enrichment occurs through the identification of the agreements and divergences in the participants' responses, promoting reflection on the topic in the here-and-now of the interview.

For this study, the decision was made to use an interview with open questions and a predefined script, which encompassed the following questions: (a) What was the interaction of this group (of couples) like, in the first workshop? (b) As the workshops progressed, was this same interaction maintained, or was there some change? (c) In general, how did this group react to the activities proposed? (d) Do you consider that the activities proposed in the program/manual were appropriate for this group? and (e) Did you perceive changes in the couples? The professionals who participated also filled out an identification sheet with sociodemographic information.

Procedures

Data collection. After the end of the program in each locale, a group interview was held with each coordinating team (moderator, assistant and observer), totaling 10 interviews. All were conducted by the same researcher – one of the authors

of this study. The questions were undertaken without being directed to any of the participants in particular, so that any one of the subjects could answer. Generally speaking, the perception of the three participants in each team was similar. When one of the participants responded by saying that her account reflected the perception of the entire team, the other participants tended to confirm this response spontaneously, either verbally or nonverbally (by nodding their heads, for example), or added to the information presented. When one of the participants spoke about her individual perceptions, the researcher asked the other members about their perceptions. Reporting of divergences of opinion between the participants also happened spontaneously in the teams, through verbalization on the part of the professionals that they had perceived certain aspects differently. Generally speaking when this happened, the participants spoke together in an attempt to develop a joint understanding of the situation, either integrating their different perceptions or justifying the differences. The interviews were recorded, with the participants' permission.

Data analysis. After the interviews had been held, they were transcribed in full and reviewed, without revealing the participants' identity. The data were analyzed using the Thematic Analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006), using the NVivo software, version 11. An inductive analysis was undertaken, so that the outlining of the themes was directly related to the data from the corpus. The analysis followed the following steps: (1) Familiarization with the data: undertaking the active reading of the data-set, seeking meanings and patterns which indicated possible themes. In this stage, we sought to identify the largest possible number of themes addressed by the participants in the 10 interviews; (2) Generating initial codes: based in the indicators from the previous stage, a further reading of the data-set was undertaken, this time codifying the text. In this stage, each excerpt of the interviews was codified according to the topics previously identified; (3) Seeking themes: this consisted of the analysis of the codes, which were exhaustively reviewed, seeking similarities and differences between them, until the formation of the themes was obtained, with their respective excerpts. For this, we considered not the number of times that a single theme was mentioned, but, rather, the aspects which characterized that response as distinct from the other topics, and with relevance for the scope of the study – that is, that addressed in some way the participants' perception about the reverberation of the program in the couples' conjugality; (4) Revising the themes: this involved the refining of the themes, through criteria of internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity. Two sub-phases were undertaken: (a) The excerpts from each theme were read and, when necessary, were re-codified, until it was considered that they formed a consistent pattern; (b) The data-set was re-read in full, to ascertain whether the themes were representative of the data-set and whether there was some other data which could have passed unnoticed; (5) Defining and naming themes: this consisted of the description of the scope of each theme; and (6) Producing the report: this involved the complete and detailed description of the themes, with the inclusion of example excerpts (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Psychology Institute of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, under number CAAE 43881515.6.0000.5334. All the professionals who participated signed the Terms of Free and Informed Consent, as did the couples who participated in the groups.

Results

Based on the Thematic Analysis, three themes were outlined. The first theme – 'Couples' reactions to the program and the activities' – relates to the report of the coordinating team about the couples' reactions to the program and to the activities. The second theme, titled 'Relationships within the couples' addresses the perspective of the coordinating team about the way in which the couples related in each group. Finally, the third theme – 'Reverberations in the relationships' addresses the team's perceptions about the program's reverberations on the participants' conjugality.

Couples' reactions to the program and the activities

This theme presents the coordinating team's report about the different reactions of the couples to the activities proposed in the workshops. On the whole, the participants were receptive to the activities. However, reluctance was also perceived to undertake some of these. The receptiveness was characterized by collaboration and involvement on the part of most of the couples with the tasks: "Really good. Great contributors. They liked it, they got involved, they did everything... Nobody refused to do anything" (Moderator 1).

The receptiveness for the tasks was perceived in the couples from all the groups. In its turn, reluctance was perceived in the couples due to different personalities, attitudes and purposes. In relation to personalities, it was sometimes perceived that the whole group showed reluctance in relation to the activity proposed by the moderators. This occurred, for example, when they began to question the activity proposed by the moderator instead of doing it, hindering the continuation of the task or the reflection on the theme: "In the first (meeting), they questioned things a lot. For example, that phrase 'out of 7 million people, why did you choose this one to live with', they were saying, like, 'But, we don't know 7 million people'" (Moderator 6).

In most cases, however, it could be perceived that it was one couple or one participant in isolation who presented behaviors representing reluctance: "I think it was more about her rebelliousness... She had this thing about, you know, being rebellious sometimes. Like: 'Yes, but why?'" (Moderator 5). And "But how am I going to do that?" (Observer 5).

In general, the reluctance was perceived by the professionals through the following attitudes: (a) Silence when faced with certain activities or topics; (b) A need for exaggerated details about the proposal, paying attention to insignificant details which hindered the discussion of the topic in question; (c) Decharacterization of the activity, that

is, not doing it how it should have been done and/or being slow to begin; and (d) Questions or criticism which were not accompanied by reflection. Finally, the professionals identified that reluctance was, in general, related to two different ends. On one hand, they reported that some participants or couples seemed to show a fear of the possibility of exposing their intimacy. In this regard, they failed to undertake the tasks, as a means of protecting themselves from this risk. On the other hand, they perceived that some participants or couples were reluctant to undertake some activities as a result of having difficulties in reflecting about the relationship: "What struck me a lot was how difficult it was for them... to look at the marriage. Whether this was regarding what was good, or what was not" (Assistant 7).

In this way, it may be thought that the reluctant behaviors may represent a form of protection against contents that have the potential for threatening the homeostasis of the group or of the couple that presented them. Although the receptiveness and reluctance were the predominant manifestations, other reactions were also recorded – such as curiosity, critical evaluation of the extent to which the ideas being worked upon made sense in the relationship, and the behavior of taking notes on everything. Furthermore, many moderators reported that the participants' reaction to the program changed according to the topic and according to the passing of time. Regarding the changes in accordance with the topic, the moderators mentioned that, when the topic was more 'light', the couples participated more. In its turn, when the topic was more 'dense' or intimate, such as those relating to conflicts or sexuality, the couples protected themselves, becoming quieter and less participative: "they participated quite a lot on that (first) day... and later ... I felt that they kind of closed up on us" (Moderator 3) and "The workshops (which worked on the topic of) conflict seemed heavier going" (Observer 3).

Regarding the changes which took place with the passing of time, there was a practically unanimous perception among the professionals that the participants came to feel more at ease as the workshops went on, as the group spirit developed, along with their trust in relation to maintaining their intimacy.

Relationship between the couples

This category addresses how the couples related to each other in each group. It may be observed that, in general, the groups of couples established a form of interaction that predominated during most of the workshops. Although changes took place in the interaction between the participants over time, only two groups reported a significant change – the others emphasized a gradual change, within a parameter more or less established. These forms of interaction may be identified in three ways:

(a) A group which was not very interactive, with high protection of intimacy: These were groups which presented few spontaneous interactions or exchanges of experiences, thus protecting their intimacy:

They were very reserved as couples... The couples themselves didn't allow themselves to talk about

their experiences, or had experiences about which they would say: "but we're not going to have to talk about this to the group, are we?"... They did not want to expose themselves, they were careful about this (Moderator 5).

(b) A group with interaction, but with moderate maintenance of the couples' intimacy: These were groups in which the couples interacted between themselves and articulated their experiences with experiences reported by other couples, but in a moderate way: "It wasn't a group which raised intimacies... but I think that after the third workshop they began to talk more. I felt greater cohesion. Between themselves, and talking more, you know?" (Observer 1) and "That's right. At the same time, it wasn't a group that became friends" (Moderator 1).

(c) A group with high interaction and greater openness to exchanging experiences. These were groups in which the couples interacted and told the others about experiences which they considered important and/or which could help other couples in specific situations, often, carrying on with this relationship of friendship in other places: "It was absolutely great, they interacted a lot, even when they went out they stayed at the bottom of the stairs talking, and there were some who arranged to go out to dinner together. So it was one of those groups, who had really good interaction" (Assistant 8).

Even with different levels of closeness, it may be perceived that in all the groups there was an exchange of possibilities of conjugal experiences, marked by the comparison of their own relationships with how the other couples in the group related. This comparison allowed the naturalization of the experience together, distinguished by the awakening of awareness, on the part of the couples, that some situations didn't happen only with them:

(The program) reinforced a lot . . . that this (conflicts in life when you are living together) in life together is normal. Everybody goes through this. And I think that this feeling stayed . . . They could understand that "ah, so it's not just us who experiences this? Okay, so this happens with everybody?". And that gives the feeling of "ah, what a relief! We're not the only ones, we're not just a pair of extraterrestrials" (Moderator 11).

This comparison with the other couples' experiences also allowed some couples to realize about aspects which they would have liked to experience in their relationship, also making it possible for them to learn new ways of functioning: "They exchanged a lot of ideas . . . Experiences of 'oh, how do you resolve this in your house? How do you do it?'" (Assistant 9).

Faced with these possibilities of exchanging experiences, however, the professionals reported the need to pay attention to accounts which did not describe the reality of conjugal experience, but which indicated an idealization of conjugality. There was a perception that comparison with the others reverberated in possibilities for maturation, so

long as the couples were truthful in their accounts. When the couples described themselves in an idealized way, the other participants reported feelings of discomfort:

And it was her who began to talk (in an activity in the first workshop), and it was this really idealized thing . . . And then the others followed . . . but this appeared, if I'm not mistaken, in the fifth workshop. I said that I was finishing up and she (the woman, 31 years old) said "ah, I feel great, it seems little by little I realized that in the first workshop everything seemed so perfect (the relationship of another couple in the group) . . . And I perceived that perhaps everything wasn't so perfect, so much so, that the person who said that everything was perfect stopped coming" (Moderator 1).

Reverberations in the relationships

This topic deals with the moderators' perceptions about the reverberations of the program in the participants' conjugality. These reverberations may be analyzed from five perspectives: those related to conjugal closeness, those related to conflicts, those related to reflection, those related to adherence to the program and – furthermore – other nonspecific reverberations, which were asymmetric within the couple, as well as the non-perception of reverberations.

The reverberations related to closeness between the members of the couple relate to the report of the moderating teams that many couples showed greater closeness as the workshops went on, whether physical or emotional: "I noticed not just physical closeness, but ease in carrying out the activities. I felt that . . . the activities were being carried out by the couple in a more 'joint' kind of way" (Assistant 7) and "It seems that the couples were becoming closer, sitting closer as they talked" (Observer 7).

The reverberations related to conflict involved the professionals' perception that some couples managed to use the space of the workshop to resolve conflicts which were important and had an intense emotional burden in their relationship. Many, what is more, reported that they came to incorporate the conflict resolution techniques learned in the program into their day-to-day, making adaptations in the strategies for moving forward with their misunderstandings:

I'm not going to forget about what (male, 20 years old) said: "Ah, if only we'd done this three weeks ago, we were arguing over this". So you see, you could perceive that they had been talking about this, that they had got home and put what they had learned into practice – or at least tried (Observer 3).

The reverberations related to reflection, on the other hand, relate to the perception of many professionals that the couples participating came to reflect on their relationship, evaluating both the satisfactory and dissatisfactory aspects. In this regard, some couples reported to the moderators that they had come to assess the viability of continuing with the

relationship, considering breaking up, and others perceived the need to continue with this space for the couple, requesting to be referred for couple therapy. As a result, the large majority showed that they were realizing about influences that qualified their relationships, as well as the way in which they were relating to each other and other possibilities for interaction:

Let me see, how long had they been married? 26, 30 years? . . . And in all this time of being married, because of the culture, because of the experience, because of their generation, they had never spoken about many of those things which were there, you know. He said "what we are doing here is really good, isn't it? That's why this is important, I had never thought about these things, they are so simple" (Moderator 7).

In their turn, the reverberations related to adherence to the program related to the moderators' observation that attending or absenting oneself from the workshops – as well as permanently withdrawing – constituted indicators of reverberations of the activities proposed in the program for conjugal life. The moderators' assessment was that many of the couples who missed a workshop, and particularly those who withdrew from the program, did so because the workshops were mobilizing relational aspects which were difficult to manage: "The couple which stopped coming, I evaluate that as a change . . . I think there was also a change in this regard, maybe from him imposing on her more (the wife in the conjugal relationship)" (Moderator 5).

Finally, other reverberations were also perceived. The coordinating teams reported perceptions of nonspecific changes in some couples, without identifying in which areas or dimensions of conjugality these occurred. For example, there are reports that the couples matured, evolved, learned from the program, and/or that the program had great significance for them. Moreover, asymmetrical reverberations were perceived in some couples, in which only one of the spouses presented changes, or in which the members of the couple seemed to have been able to reflect more on aspects of their individuality than on their conjugal relationship. Finally, it is necessary to report that some couples did not demonstrate having made changes in their relationship after participating in the program. Some of these couples remained unknown to the professionals, who were unable to identify whether the program could help them in something. For other couples, however, the non-perception of changes was attributed by the teams to the idea that the couples had shown good levels of conjugal quality since the beginning of their relationship.

Discussion

The topics identified based on the coordinating teams' report indicate a vast range of feelings and perceptions associated with participation in the marital education program investigated. The theme 'Couples' reactions to the program and the activities' indicates the moderators' perception that there was ambiguity of feeling in relation to the program. On the one hand, one can think

that the receptiveness shown by most of the couples indicates the existence of a social demand for this type of work, allied with a shortage of spaces in which couples can think about the relationship, in a perspective which encompasses the reality of life together, rather than its idealizations.

On the other hand, the teams' perception regarding the reactions of reluctance also indicates the couples' difficulty in looking at their own relationships. This difficulty is also recorded in the studies that, for decades, have observed the triangulation of children in their parents' conjugal problems (Féres-Carneiro, 1980; Juras & Costa, 2017). As a result, the participation in the program makes it possible for many couples to come to perceive aspects of their relationship, and patterns of conjugal functioning, of which they had previously been unaware. This process entails looking at one's own responsibility in relation to the situation in which the relationship finds itself, and demands personal availability on the part of both spouses. When this availability is not present, couples may abandon the program. In this regard, the perception of Williamson et al. (2015) is corroborated: that the effects of these programs in weakened couples depend on the type of risk factor, given that, the more delicate and serious the conjugal problems are, the more difficult it tends to be for the members of the couple to work on said aspects, particularly in a group format.

As a result of this collective characteristic of programs of relationship education, it is also perceived that many couples begin the process in a state of fear related to the relationship between participating in the group and maintaining their privacy. However, the relationship established between the couples is an aspect of great importance for the dynamic and development of marital educational programs, having been one of the themes identified in the Thematic Analysis. The results demonstrate that exchanging experiences was an outstanding factor for developing reflection on the part of groups and of couples. On the one hand, this process helps in naturalizing life as a couple, given that many couples idealize their relationship based in models propagated by the media, or have distorted perceptions regarding the relationships of other couples whom they know. When there is the possibility to truly dialogue about the challenges of conjugality, as well as about its benefits, there occurs a process of honest reflection, which makes possible a feeling of sharing of experiences. In this context, for some couples, exchanging experiences allows them to accept aspects which they thought only they had – such as, for example, understanding that all couples argue.

On the other hand, this possibility for comparison which appears in the sharing of conjugal experiences also makes it possible for the couples to perceive other possibilities and alternative ways to relate to each other in the relationship, particularly in those couples who present high levels of dissatisfaction in their relationship. Inevitably, the group ends up becoming a means of comparison, which can trigger feelings of relief or of distress in the couples.

In order for such processes to be able to become established, it is desirable for the couples to have a minimum level of interaction during the workshops, an aspect which also contributes to making the discussion of the topic more relaxed. However, it should be emphasized that high levels of interaction

between the couples do not necessarily mean that there is capacity to reflect on the relationship. In some situations, a group which is excessively interactive may use this facility for communication as a way of fleeing from the task, resulting in a friendly social interaction in the discussions which, nevertheless, remains superficial. In this regard, there is no way to determine a desirable level of interaction between the couples. The ideal would be that, regardless of this level, reflection may occur.

The professionals' reports about the reverberations in the relationships corroborate other studies, which point to these programs' potential to produce changes in conjugality (Bolsoni-Silva et al., 2014; Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Rhoades, 2015; Silva & Vandenberghe, 2009; Stanley et al., 2006). The capacity to produce greater closeness and to generate reflections between the couples may be considered to be a key aspect for any other changes to occur, so much so that in studies with couples in long-term relationships, the closeness and cohesion are factors which impact positively on conjugal satisfaction (Norgren et al., 2004). In its turn, the professionals' perception that the program reverberated in the form of resolving the couples' conflicts is an aspect of great relevance both because this is one of the main axes of the work of the "Living as partners" program (Wagner et al., 2015) and due to the relevance of managing conflicts for conjugal well-being (Scheeren et al., 2014).

The moderators' report about perception that missing workshops and withdrawing totally are also signs that the program mobilized the couples denotes the need for constant care that this type of work demands. The relationship between two people living together is the stage both for realizations and for difficulties in life, and participation in this type of program mobilizes both aspects. Great sensitivity to the movements undertaken by the couples is needed, as their attendance in this type of program seems to indicate, from the very beginning, willingness to do something for the relationship, no matter how difficult this may be during the process.

Conjugality is seen, in common knowledge, as a task involving development. Even with the social changes and flexibility relating to the demand for achieving normative tasks of the lifecycle, establishing an adult and long-lasting relationship continues to be an objective which is common to many people. However, one does not always find reflection about the real meaning of this stage (Fonseca & Duarte, 2014). This being so, life *a deux* becomes natural, and this process has, as its main parameter, the progenitors' family model of conjugality, which becomes a pattern to be repeated or denied (Mosmann et al., 2015). Thus, the marital education programs constitute a possibility for learning new ways of relating, encouraging the modification of the relationship's dynamic factors (Halford et al., 2003) and contributing to the establishing of reflection and maturing of the two people's relationship.

The three themes identified in this Thematic Analysis complement each other, demonstrating the inherent complexity to the work with couples in this format. Exploring the participants' experiences, based on the perspective of the professionals who administer the program, made it possible to investigate in greater depth the dynamic which was established in the development of this strategy of marital education.

More specifically, one can understand the different reactions experienced by the couples regarding this proposal, reactions which may repeat in other groups using this program, or in other marital education programs which work using the group format. In this regard, extending the understanding of how the relationships between couples are configured is a second contribution resulting from this study, as this interaction can qualify the couples' reflections and learning. Furthermore, distinguishing the changes perceived by the professionals in the participating couples' conjugality contributes to extending the literature, corroborating aspects already found in quantitative studies. Taking these results into account, it is considered that the present study systematizes benefits in the training of the professionals who propose to mediate such programs.

It is necessary to emphasize that all the results presented here represent the perception of the professionals who coordinated the programs and refer to the observations limited to ten groups of couples – not exhausting the possibilities for reactions, group manifestations and reverberations. In addition to this, the 10 groups were undertaken in cities in the South of Brazil, and do not, therefore, represent the entire cultural diversity of Brazil. As a result, replicating the study in other contexts could contribute to understanding the reverberations of marital education programs in couples. Furthermore, investigating the experience of couples through their own reports would constitute a future perspective for investigation, which could contribute with other examinations and reflections on psychoeducational work with couples.

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