

# Professional Trainers – Satisfied Program Participants: Evaluation of an Approach to Disseminate Evidence-Based Interventions by Training Students with a Major in Psychology

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## Keywords

Dissemination · Prevention · Couples · EPL ·  
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## Summary

**Background:** The evaluation of strategies to successfully implement and disseminate evidence-based interventions is of high relevance in both prevention and intervention research. This also applies to the area of preventing and treating chronic relationship distress in couples. Exemplified by the German couple relationship enhancement program ‘EPL – A Couples’ Learning Program’, a new dissemination approach is being investigated. **Method:** 108 students with a major in psychology were qualified as EPL trainers and, under close supervision, conducted 2 training courses with couples. In terms of applicability, 2 dependent variables were investigated: the students’ expertise of being a communication trainer for couples (self- and external assessment) and the couples’ consumer satisfaction. **Results:** The self-rated trainer expertise significantly increased over time. With regard to the couples’ trainer evaluation, differences were found neither between the students’ first and second training course nor between students with or without a bachelor degree. On average, the couples evaluated the trainer expertise and their consumer satisfaction as being high. **Discussion:** The new dissemination approach seems promising in view of increasing the number of well-qualified trainers. An adaptation to other institutions and prevention programs is conceivable and could sustainably increase the availability of evidence-based interventions.

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## Schlüsselwörter

Dissemination · Prävention · Paare · EPL ·  
Trainerausbildung

## Zusammenfassung

**Hintergrund:** In der Präventions- und Interventionsforschung kommt der Untersuchung von Strategien zur erfolgreichen Verbreitung evidenzbasierter Maßnahmen eine immer größer werdende Bedeutung zu. Dies gilt auch für den Bereich der Prävention und Behandlung chronischer Beziehungskonflikte bei Paaren. Am Beispiel des Kommunikationstrainings «Ein Partnerschaftliches Lernprogramm (EPL)» wird ein neuer Disseminationsansatz untersucht, der zu einer Steigerung der Angebotshäufigkeit führen könnte. **Methode:** 108 Studierende der Psychologie wurden zu EPL-Trainern ausgebildet, die anschließend 2 Paarkurse unter Supervision durchführten. Für die Übertragbarkeit des Ansatzes werden 2 abhängige Variablen analysiert: die Trainerkompetenz der Studierenden (Selbst- und Fremdurteil) sowie die Kurszufriedenheit der Paare. **Ergebnisse:** Die selbsteingeschätzte Trainerkompetenz verbesserte sich durch die Ausbildung signifikant. Bei der durch die Paare fremdeingeschätzten Trainerkompetenz ergab sich weder ein signifikanter Unterschied zwischen dem ersten und zweiten EPL-Kurs noch zwischen Studierenden mit und ohne Bachelorabschluss. Die Trainerkompetenz und die Kurszufriedenheit wurden im Mittel als hoch bewertet. **Diskussion:** Der Disseminationsansatz stellt eine vielversprechende Strategie dar, die Anzahl an in evidenzbasierten Programmen ausgebildeten Trainern zu vergrößern. Somit könnte erheblicher Einfluss auf die begrenzte Verfügbarkeit von Präventionsangeboten in der Praxis genommen werden. Eine Anwendung auf andere Einrichtungen und andere Präventionsprogramme ist denkbar und könnte langfristig zu einer nachhaltigen Veränderung der Angebotsstruktur führen.

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## Introduction

The insufficient transfer of scientific findings into psychotherapeutic practice is a problem that has been discussed for years in the field of psychology [Glasgow et al., 2012]. Since the efficacy of evidence-based interventions has been verified in controlled trials, their successful dissemination and implementation are becoming an increasing focus of intervention research [Beelmann and Karing, 2014]. Putting scientific findings into practice poses a big challenge, which in most cases turns out to be complex and expensive. Glasgow et al. [2012] note that, although there have been significant advances in research, there has been little change at the level of the population. Due to insufficient dissemination of evidence-based interventions, they estimate that the proportion of people who are being helped by evidence-based programs, compared to those who could potentially benefit from them, is 1–5%.

In spite of that, many times more government funding worldwide is available for basic research and studies evaluating program efficacy than for the dissemination and implementation of already existing evidence-based interventions and their investigation in practice [Glasgow et al., 2012]. For this reason, alternative ways must be found to sustainably improve the availability of evidence-based interventions.

This goes not only for psychotherapeutic interventions, but also for preventive interventions, of which the importance has risen considerably in recent decades, both internationally and in German-speaking countries, across different contexts [Beelmann and Karing, 2014]. One of these contexts is the prevention and treatment of chronic conflicts and dissatisfaction among couples [Job et al., 2014a]. Internationally there already exist various couple relationship enhancement (CRE) programs that were developed to assist couples in the early detection and solution of problems. With regard to the efficacy and effectiveness, results of (randomized-)controlled trials demonstrate these CRE programs have significant short- and longer-term positive effects on the partners' way of dealing with one another, of dealing with unsolved conflicts, and on the partners' reported relationship satisfaction (see Bodenmann and Kessler [2011] for an overview). In German-speaking countries, these positive effects were verified mainly for the communication and problem solving skills training 'A Couples' Learning Program – EPL' (Ein Partnerschaftliches Lernprogramm) [Job et al., 2014b] and the Swiss 'Couples Coping Enhancement Training – CCET' [Bodenmann, 2012]. But the developers of EPL and CCET have so far mainly been successful in getting the programs disseminated on a limited scale. The EPL, for example, is primarily offered as adult education by churches and as a Catholic premarital education program [Job et al., 2014b]. In the past 25 years, more than 1,500 people have been taught to be EPL trainers (primarily psychologists, pedagogues, social workers and theologians, who already had experience in working with couples and groups). About 250 EPL training courses are held with a total of about 1,000 couples throughout Germany each year. In Europe as a whole, by comparison, EPL is by far the most widespread training program for couples and yet reaches only a very small proportion of couples [Job et al., 2014b].

Against this background, and by taking into account the high social relevance of prevention for couples and the great interest in support services, this area is very well suited to develop new dissemination approaches and to facilitate giving more couples access to evidence-based interventions.

### *Why Prevention for Couples?*

In Western countries, today more than 40% of all marriages end in divorce [Statistisches Bundesamt, 2013]. The rate of separation of unmarried couples is estimated to be even higher [e.g., Kiernan, 2003]. In addition, studies show that up to 30% of respondents in stable relationships rate themselves as being dissatisfied (in Germany up to 4.8 million) [Whisman et al., 2008]. This is mainly because of long-lasting dissatisfaction and frequent, recurring conflicts between the partners, which may have numerous negative consequences for those affected (for an overview, see, e.g., Heinrichs et al. [2008]).

Since a stable intimate relationship is one of young people's most important life goals [Hahlweg and Bodenmann, 2003], there is great interest in information on this topic and on how to deal with recurring problems. This can also be seen on the Internet, where a Google search for «Probleme Beziehung» (problems relationship) turned up (on September 24, 2014) over 8 million hits in less than a second, and «Hilfe Beziehung» (help relationship) more than 11 million. With a closer look at the hits, however, it quickly becomes apparent that evidence-based approaches play hardly any role here.

### *What Assistance Is There for Couples?*

More and more couples are looking for professional assistance to deal with their problems [Kröger et al., 2007]. Since couples therapy in Germany is not covered by health insurance, but must be financed by the individuals themselves, many look for help in marriage-, family-, or life-counseling centers, where in many cases the counseling is free of costs. Due to the high demand and the simultaneous decline in financial resources, however, people have to put up with long waits [Kröger et al., 2007]. In addition, couples with identical problems encounter great differences in the counseling methods and approaches of providers, who often have different basic qualifications and therapeutic orientations [Engl et al., 2004]. Because of this limited comparability, there are only a few studies that investigated the quality and effectiveness of the usual kinds of counseling with respect to changes in relationship satisfaction or a reduced risk of separation to date [e.g., Klann, 2002].

An alternative to couples counseling or therapy is to provide preventive interventions such as EPL [Job et al., 2014b] or CCET [Bodenmann, 2012]. However, in a Germany-wide survey, Lösel et al. [2006] found, that there has still been no widespread dissemination of preventive evidence-based programs. The authors reported that out of 200,000 preventive interventions offered annually in Germany, a total of 65% had been developed by the providers themselves and only 1.4% had been studied in controlled trials. Furthermore, only 1,500 of these services (0.75%) were preventive interventions for couples.

Considering these results, the field of prevention for couples has also attracted greater attention politically in recent years: As part of the expert 'Dialogue on the Future of Germany' initiated by the Chancellor in 2012, concrete proposals were formulated to promote and strengthen couples [Experten und Expertinnen des Dialogs über Deutschlands Zukunft (Experts on the Dialogue on Germany's Future), 2012]. These included widespread campaigns for easily understood communication of research-based information and the development and delivery of training courses to strengthen couples' relationships. However, so far no steps have been taken in this regard, since good models for dissemination of existing evidence-based approaches are lacking [Job et al., 2014b].

### *The Current Study*

The present work uses the example of EPL [Job et al., 2014b] to examine a new approach to the dissemination of evidence-based prevention programs. Schillinger [2010] defines dissemination as the targeted distribution of information and intervention materials to a specific group of clinical practitioners in the health-care system. The goal is the dissemination of knowledge about interventions and related skills, to achieve a successful transfer of scientific findings in practice [Beelmann and Karing, 2014].

In the context of evaluation studies, university students are often qualified in a CRE program and then perform the intervention under supervision [e.g., Hahlweg et al., 1998; Markman et al., 1993]. That is why we thought about developing a standardized instructional program for students with a major in psychology. This could represent a promising approach because the students 1) already get sensitized to the field of prevention in couples during their basic studies; 2) are already taught professionally relevant practical skills and apply these directly in the preventive setting; and 3) can have the first positive experiences with an evidence-based intervention. According to Beelmann and Karing [2014], particularly the latter increases the likelihood that the students will also use the new skills in their future professional lives. Even if after graduation they do not conduct an EPL course by the manual, the young psychologists should be able to lead discussions between partners and to teach couples communication and problem-solving skills right from the beginning of their professional careers. This approach meets the repeatedly expressed demand for more practical relevance and training in university studies.

Since this is a pilot project for the standardized instruction of students, a comprehensive evaluation of this approach should be conducted. With regard to the participating couples, it has already been shown that the students' instruction of the couples is as effective as that of experienced professionals [e.g., Hahlweg et al., 1998]: 3 months after participation in the EPL, both women and men reported a significant reduction in number of unsolved relationship conflicts ( $d = 0.30/0.20$ ) (Job et al., 2015, personal communication). No significant change was found in relationship satisfaction ( $d = 0.06/-0.03$ ); however, this was to be expected, because even before attending the training course, more than 70% of the couples had been satisfied with their relationship. A closer look at the results showed that dissatisfied couples benefited significantly more

from participating in the CRE program than couples who had expressed a high relationship satisfaction at pre-assessment (Job et al., 2015, personal communication).

Along with the effectiveness with couples, Kröger [2006] noted that the subjective satisfaction of the participants is also important information with respect to the acceptance and evaluation of an intervention. An investigation of the effectiveness of the trainers, in terms of whether they feel comfortable in their role as a couples trainer, is also recommended to evaluate dissemination approaches. According to Beelmann and Karing [2014] a positive attitude toward an intervention and high perception of self-efficacy on the part of instructors increases the motivation and commitment to use the intervention in a high-quality way, faithful to its concept, even after the official instruction is over. Based on these considerations, the present study raises the following research questions:

- How satisfied are the couples with the students' EPL courses? Based on previous EPL findings, high overall satisfaction ratings are expected [e.g., Kaiser et al., 1998]; thus more than 90% of couples should be satisfied or very satisfied with their training. Since all students undergo the same instruction, the satisfaction ratings should not differ significantly depending on either their practical experience (first or second EPL course) or the trainers' degree program (whether they already have a bachelor's degree or not).
- Does the students' self-reported competence as trainers improve as a result of the EPL instruction? Due to the standardized approach to instruction, high effect sizes are to be expected in the trainers' ratings of their own expertise.
- How do the participants perceive the competence of the student trainers? Because of the increase of the students' practical experience, it is assumed that the externally perceived competence of the student trainers would increase significantly from the first EPL course to the second. Since the students are only allowed to conduct EPL with couples after passing a group accreditation, the average evaluation of students who are still in a bachelor's program should not differ from the average evaluation of those who have already acquired their undergraduate degrees.

## **Method**

### *EPL Instruction for Students*

Since 2010, each semester 12–16 students with a major in psychology at the University of Braunschweig were qualified as EPL trainers. The instruction was a co-curricular activity financed by the "Quality Teaching Program," which is voluntary and free of charge for the students.

Taking into account the recommendations of McHugh and Barlow [2010] for the dissemination of evidence-based psychological interventions, the instruction includes both didactic elements (e.g., reading scientific background literature, workshop participation) and skills training (e.g., role playing with feedback, implementation of supervised EPL trainings with couples). Two 2-day instructional workshops are held, with one instructor for 4 students each. On the first weekend, students go through the EPL as participants (the students are randomly grouped into couples), while the instructors assume the role of couple trainers. They also study together the detailed EPL manual [Thurmaier et al., 2012]. On the second weekend of instruction, the students practice the EPL trainer skills in supervised role playing.

After the instructional workshops there is a 2.5-hour group accreditation, which also consists of role playing. After successful completion of this accreditation, the students conduct 2 supervised EPL courses with couples. Only then they receive an official trainer license, which allows them to conduct the EPL autonomously.

#### *Intervention: A Couples' Learning Program – EPL*

The manualized and highly structured EPL is performed by 2 accredited trainers with 2-4 couples. A training course can take place weekly in five 2-hour sessions or as 2-day-long intensive instruction. The five sessions are organized into the following topics: 1) development of speaker and listener skills, 2) expression of negative feelings, 3) solving problems, 4) expectations of the relationship, and 5) sexuality. A detailed description of the contents and processes of the individual sessions and the objectives of EPL can be found in Job et al. [2014b].

#### *Study Design*

After their participation in an EPL training and independently of one another, all participants were asked to fill in, an anonymous questionnaire about their satisfaction with the program and their evaluation of their trainers' competence. In order to detect possible changes in the trainers' self-assessment of their competence, the students were asked repeatedly during the instructional program to evaluate their own skills by using another questionnaire. This was done anonymously before and after the two instructional workshops, and since the summer semester of 2012, also after completion of the first EPL course.

#### *Student Sample*

From the summer semester of 2010 to September 2013, 65 undergraduate psychology majors and 43 students with bachelor's degrees in psychology participated in the standardized instruction program. Of these 108 students, 16 of whom were male (15%), 104 completed the instruction successfully. 4 students failed the accreditation and were therefore not permitted to conduct EPL with couples.

The self-assessment of trainer competence before and after the instructional workshops was introduced 1 year from the start of the EPL student instruction. The analyses are based on the complete data of  $n = 58$  students. The new survey after the first EPL course started in the winter semester of 2012/13. Here we have data for  $n = 19$  students.

#### *Recruitment and Selection of Couples*

Recruitment of couples was done by means of newspaper articles, fliers and on the website [www.epl-tubs.de](http://www.epl-tubs.de). After their application, a brief telephone screening of the couple was performed using a German translation of the Quality Marriage Index (QMI) [Norton, 1983]. With 7 items, QMI assesses the couples' satisfaction with their relationship. Internal consistency is reported to be very high [ $\alpha = 0.94$ ; Graham et al., 2011]. The criterion for the participation of a couple in the EPL was a QMI total score  $\geq 27$ . For the 7 couples who fell below this value, couples counseling or therapy was recommended.

#### *Sample of Couples*

276 heterosexual and 4 homosexual couples took part in the students' EPL courses. The average age of the women was 42.7 (standard deviation (SD) = 10.9 years), of the men 45.4 (SD = 11.0 years). The average relationship duration was 13.0 years (SD = 11.6 years), 84% of couples were living together, 59% were married. 178 women (65%) and 191 men (69%) stated that their highest school education was at least a high school diploma. 9 couples dropped out of the EPL during the instruction period (3%). In regard to age and relationship satisfaction, these couples did not differ significantly from the couples who took part in the entire EPL course.

Assessment of the satisfaction of participants with the EPL began half a year after the start of the student instruction. We have the data of  $n = 407$  participants (73%). The estimation of trainer competence by the couples, which was first introduced in the summer of 2011, is available for  $n = 73$  students (70%) from the first and  $n = 59$  students (58%) from the second EPL course.

#### *Instruments*

*Client Satisfaction Questionnaire for the EPL (CSQ-EPL)*: The CSQ-EPL is based on the German version of the Client Satisfaction Questionnaire [CSQ; Turner et al., 2007], which was developed to assess the satisfaction of parents with the Positive Parenting Program – Triple P [Sanders, 2012]. The revision includes the 6 generally formulated items of the CSQ, in which the partners evaluate, e.g., the quality of the program (fig. 1). Answers are given on a 7-point Likert scale (1 is poor, 7 is very good). The total score is calculated by the average value of the item raw values (range of values: 1–7). The internal consistency of the CSQ-EPL in the current sample is  $\alpha = 0.85$ .

*Questionnaire on One's Own Competence as a Trainer (Fragebogen zur eigenen Trainerkompetenz, FTK)*: The FTK is an adaptation of the German version of the Parent Consultation Skills Checklist [Turner, 2003], which is used for evaluation of trainer instruction as part of the Triple P [Sanders, 2012]. Like the original questionnaire, the FTK includes 22 items on various aspects of consulting and instruction competence, but with the content adapted to the EPL (see fig. 2 for sample items). Answer are given on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = not competent at all, 7 = very competent). The FTK total score is calculated from the average of the item raw values (range: 1–7;  $\alpha = 0.95$ ).

*Questionnaire for Evaluation of the Course Leaders (Einschätzung der Kursleitung, EdK) by the Couples*: The EdK was developed at the Institute of Psychology at the University of Braunschweig for the purpose of evaluating the conduction of Group Triple P by university students [Petersen and Sander, 2011]. The 6 items ask participants to evaluate their trainers' competence with regard to presentation of content, the instruction about and conduct of exercises, answering questions, empathy and overall competence. Answers are given on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = very inadequate, 7 = excellent). After an EPL course and independently from one another, the couples evaluated the competence of their trainers; a separate questionnaire was completed for both course leaders. The total score is calculated from the average of the item raw values (range: 1–7,  $\alpha = 0.94$ ). Depending on the number of participating couples in a course (from 2 to a maximum of 4), there are 8-16 EdK questionnaires per student.

## **Results**

The data analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 21. Depending on the number of groups to be compared, we used  $t$ -tests for paired samples, Univariate Analyses of Variance (ANOVA), or the non-parametric equivalent, the Wilcoxon test or the Kruskal-Wallis test.

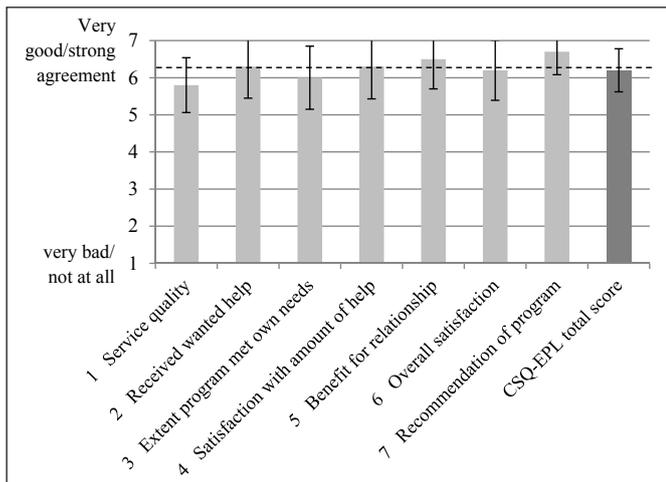
With regard to the self-rated trainer competence (FTK), intra-group effect sizes were calculated for both the total score and the individual items. The formula used for this was

$$d = (\text{post} - \text{pre}) / \text{standard deviation of the difference}$$

according to Rustenbach [2003, p. 81]. According to Cohen [1988], effect sizes from 0.20 to 0.39 are considered low, from 0.40 to 0.79 as moderate and above 0.80 as high.

#### *Satisfaction of Participants with the EPL (FzZ)*

The quality of the EPL was rated as good to excellent by 399 participants (98%). 400 participants (98%) were satisfied to very satisfied with the level of support they received, and 401 (99%) indicated that their relationship benefited somewhat to definitely from participation in the EPL. Overall, 399 (98%) of participants were satisfied or very satisfied with the EPL and 402 (99%) would probably or definitely recommend it. Figure 1 shows the means and standard deviations of satisfaction ratings on the item level and for the total score.



**Fig. 1.** Means and standard deviations of the couples in the 'Client Satisfaction Questionnaire for the EPL, CSQ-EPL' on item level, and compared to the total score.

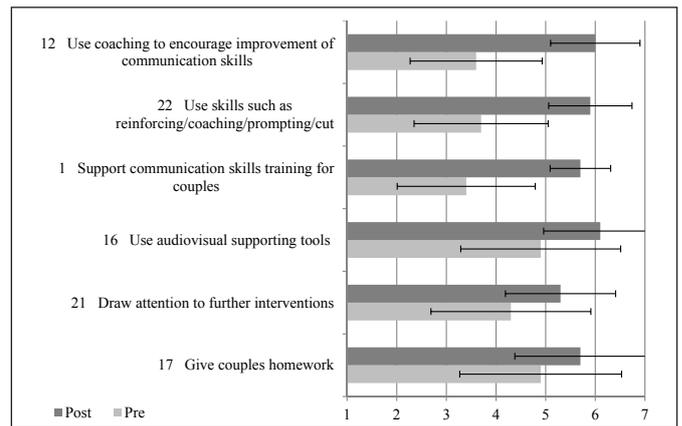
*Differences Depending on Trainer's Practical Experience:* With regard to the practical experience of the student trainer duo, 3 groups were compared: a) first course for both trainers ( $n = 36$ ), b) second course for both trainers ( $n = 25$ ), c) first course for one trainer, second course for the other ( $n = 14$ ). Since the Levene Test for equality of variances was significant ( $F(2,72) = 7.96$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), and thus violated the preconditions of the ANOVA, the non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test was used instead. It showed that couples' satisfaction ratings did not significantly depend on the practical experience of the trainers ( $\chi^2(2, N = 75) = 3.81$ ;  $p = 0.149$ ).

*Differences Depending on Degree Program:* Next we examined whether the average satisfaction of the couples differed depending on whether the EPL course was conducted by a) 2 undergraduate trainers ( $n = 32$ ), b) 1 undergraduate trainer and 1 with a bachelor's degree ( $n = 25$ ) or c) 2 trainers with bachelor's degrees ( $n = 18$ ). This also yielded a non-significant result in the ANOVA ( $F(2,72) = 0.20$ ;  $p = 0.82$ ).

#### Assessment of One's Own Competence as a Trainer (FTK)

*Changes through EPL Instruction:* From before to after the instructional workshops, there was a highly significant increase in trainers' ratings of their own competence ( $M_{Pre} = 4.0$ ;  $SD_{Pre} = 1.0$ ;  $M_{Post} = 5.7$ ;  $SD_{Post} = 0.5$ ;  $t(57) = -12.1$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), with a large effect size of  $d = 1.58$ . Figure 2 shows the means and standard deviations for each of the 3 items with the highest and lowest effect size. We found a moderate increase in trainer competence for more basic skills like 'give couples homework to promote self-directed learning' ( $d = 0.42$ ) and a strong increase in EPL-specific, more flexibly applicable trainer skills such as 'use coaching to encourage couples to improve their communication skills' ( $d = 1.67$ ).

For those  $n = 19$  student trainers who also rated their own competence after the conduction of the first EPL course, a further increase was found; however, the change was only marginally significant ( $d = 0.21$ ;  $z = -1.53$ ;  $p = 0.06$ ). The pre-assessment mean scores of this subgroup did not differ significantly from the mean



**Fig. 2.** Means and standard deviations of the student trainers in the 'Questionnaire on One's Own Competence as a Trainer, FTK' for each of the 3 items, with the highest and lowest effect size in ascending size (1 = not competent at all, 7 = very competent).

scores of the students for whom there was no additional rating of their own competence as trainers ( $t(56) = -0.34$ ;  $p = 0.73$ ); also the size of the increase from before to after the instructional workshops ( $d = 1.76$ ;  $z = -3.82$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) was comparable to the total group.

#### Assessment of Trainer Competence by the EPL Participants (EdK)

With regard to the external assessment of the trainers' competence by the couples, we found a high average overall evaluation for both training course 1 ( $N = 73$ ,  $M = 6.1$ ,  $SD = 0.40$ ,  $Min = 5.2$ ,  $Max = 7.0$ ) and training course 2 ( $N = 58$ ,  $M = 6.0$ ,  $SD = 0.46$ ,  $Min = 5.0$ ,  $Max = 7.0$ ). The expected increase in the trainer evaluation from the first to the second course was not confirmed ( $t(55) = 1.11$ ;  $p = 0.14$ ;  $d = -0.14$ ). Even at the level of the items, there was little variance shown in the mean ratings: In course 1, the mean values of the items per participant varied between  $M_{Min} = 6.0$  ( $SD_{Min} = 0.4$ ) and  $M_{Max} = 6.1$  ( $SD_{Max} = 0.5$ ) and in course 2 between  $M_{Min} = 5.9$  ( $SD_{Min} = 0.4$ ) and  $M_{Max} = 6.2$  ( $SD_{Max} = 0.5$ ).

#### Differences Depending on Degree Program:

The difference in trainer competence assessed by the couples depending on the trainers' current degree program (bachelor's degree or undergraduate) did not prove significant neither for first ( $t(74) = -1.96$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ) nor for the second course ( $t(57) = -1.50$ ,  $p = 0.14$ ).

## Discussion

Although, in recent years, more attention has been paid to the field of the dissemination and implementation of evidence-based interventions in both prevention and intervention research, in most areas there is still a large gap between scientific knowledge and practice [Beelmann and Karing, 2014; Glasgow et al., 2012].

The reason for this is that so far there has been a lack of successful strategies to move interventions that have been proven effective

into widespread use [e.g., Job et al., 2014a]. This also applies to the field of prevention and treatment of chronic conflicts and dissatisfaction among couples, which has become socio-politically important in recent years [e.g., Dialogue on the Future of Germany, 2012]. In this context, we present results of a new approach, which over the long term could contribute to improving the dissemination of evidence-based programs.

For more than 3 years students with a major in psychology at the University of Braunschweig were trained in the CRE program EPL [Job et al., 2014b]. As part of the instruction, the students conduct 2 EPL courses with couples, under supervision. With regard to the effectiveness, it has already been shown that particularly couples who were rather dissatisfied with their relationship benefitted significantly from their participation in a student training course (Job et al., 2015, personal communication). To evaluate the success of a dissemination approach, however, further information is needed [e.g., Beelmann and Karing, 2014; Kröger, 2006], which is why results for couples' consumer satisfaction and for the students' external and self-assessed competence as EPL trainers are reported in the present study. Our findings mostly confirm the trial hypotheses:

– *How satisfied are the couples with the students' EPL training courses?* As expected, participants expressed very high satisfaction with the students' EPL courses. The results are thus comparable with those of earlier EPL studies [e.g., Kaiser et al., 1998]. According to Kröger [2006], this is an important result with respect to the acceptance of the intervention and the student trainers, which testifies to the high quality of the student instruction and the EPL as a method of communication skills training for couples.

In further analyses of satisfaction, there was, as expected, no difference depending on either the practical experience of the trainer or the degree program. These findings also speak for the quality of the standardized instruction and suggest that targeted advanced training in a program and targeted supervision in implementing the program are more important than primary professional training [cf. Beelmann and Karing, 2014].

– *Does the students' self-reported competence as trainers improve as a result of the EPL instruction?* From before to after the instructional workshops, there was a highly significant increase in the students' self-assessed trainer competence. In the subsample for which there was also an assessment after the first EPL course, their own sense of competence continued to increase as a trend. Despite the rather small sample size, the results suggest that by combining didactic elements and skills training for students who had no experience in working with couples, good subjectively perceived competence as a couple trainer can be achieved. According to Beelmann and Karing [2014,] this result is of central importance for the sustainability of instruction in a preventive intervention, since high perceived self-efficacy increases the likelihood that the new trainers will use the intervention and its contents in a high-quality way, faithful to its concept, even in the long-term.

– *How do the participants perceive the competence of the student trainers?* In terms of the externally perceived trainer competence (EdK), the hypothesis that the evaluation from the first to the second EPL course would increase because of the students' increased

practical experience was not confirmed. The trainer competence was already rated as high, on average, in the first courses, so that an increase in the second courses was hardly possible (ceiling effect). With regard to the trainers' degree program, as expected, there was no significant difference between trainers with and without bachelor's degrees. In interpreting the results it should be considered that there was a continuous flow of new couples taking part in the EPL courses. Individual expectations, evaluation benchmarks, and response biases could make the response behavior between the couples of the first and second EPL courses different from one another. Because of the ceiling effect, it is also questionable how well the EdK differentiates in the upper range. Despite these limitations, the results of the externally assessed trainer competence indicate a high quality conduction of EPL courses by student trainers.

To validate our findings it would be interesting to check whether the non-significant difference depending on degree program is also found in the students' self-rated trainer competence. However, since the trainers' assessment of their own skills was anonymous and did not indicate their degree program, it was not possible to assign the two questionnaires to one another.

Despite these limitations and some missing values, the large sample size is a major strength of the present study compared to other studies in couples research. By also taking into consideration that the participants of the current investigation were very heterogeneous compared to those in many classical studies [e.g., Hahlweg et al., 1998; Markman et al., 1993], the results are encouraging and testify to the success of the student instruction.

Dissemination research, however, also includes other questions that could not be answered by the present findings. These include in particular a) sustainability, i.e. the extent to which the intervention will continue to be used after completion of the instruction, and b) fidelity to the concept which refers to the long-term degree trainers conduct the program as intended by the developers (e.g., procedure, extent, quality of implementation) [Petermann, 2014]. The sustainability could be investigated by re-assessing the student trainers some time after completion of the instruction and by asking them, for example, whether they conduct the EPL and/or parts of it in their daily professional life and/or whether they work with couples and, if so, to what extent. As a result of their positive experience with the evidence-based intervention and their work with couples, it would be desirable if the students were more open to the field of prevention for couples and if they used the new skills in their daily work, e.g., at counseling centers. If so, and if the student instruction turned out to be sustainable, it could significantly improve the quality of work with couples in the long run. In a follow-up survey, the former students could also be asked about their current job location. The fact that many students do not stay in the same city or the same region after completing their studies, but move again [Fabian and Minsk, 2008], makes it likely that this approach could also lead to a supra-regional distribution of knowledge about the intervention.

Based on the overall positive findings, in terms of high consumer satisfaction ratings and a high external and self-assessed trainer

expertise following the instruction workshops, the new dissemination approach seems very promising. Through the standardized instruction, students with a major in psychology are taught to become qualified communication skills trainers for couples and, at the same time, high-quality delivery of the EPL is ensured. Moreover, while the students are receiving their instruction, couples are being offered free participation in the EPL. This dissemination approach could also serve as a model for other universities and other prevention programs. Especially for manualized and highly structured programs, a standardized instruction of students could represent an effective way of significantly improving program dissemination. According to the Berufsverband Deutscher Psychologinnen und Psychologen [Professional Association of German Psychologists, 2013], there are currently 60 accredited bachelor's degree programs in psychology in Germany. If 40 of these institutes would instruct 30 students every year in an evidence-based prevention program, Germany would have 1,200 new and high-qualified trainers every year. By comparison, this is roughly equivalent to the number of trainers who have been qualified in EPL in

the past 25 years [Job et al., 2014b]. What remains is the question of the short- and long-term financing; the Braunschweig pilot study, however, shows that options do exist.

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## Disclosure Statement

K.H. is one of the developers of the EPL program; K.H., I.V. and A.-K.J. are EPL trainers and instructors; M.M. is an EPL trainer. However, there are no resulting conflicts of interest arising in relation to the paper, which is part of A.-K.J.'s cumulative dissertation.

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