

**A qualitative review of client responses to treatment in PAIRS:  
a 120 hour psychoeducational group intervention for relationships**

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**Abstract**

*This qualitative study of 765 participants in PAIRS trainings between 1991 and 2003 recorded hand written answers to four open-ended questions at the end of the 120-hour course. Using grounded theory, content analysis revealed 88% positive responses to the PAIRS program, 97% positive responses to the PAIRS leaders, more voluntary naming of emotional rather than either behavioral or cognitive components, and a 90% desire for monthly ongoing groups following the classes. Implicated are the usefulness of open-ended questions for qualitative research concerning marital therapy practice, the need for integration of emotional/behavioral/cognitive treatments for marital therapy and further research concerning the use of emotional/experiential treatments.*

## **A qualitative review of client responses to treatment in PAIRS: a 120 hour psychoeducational group intervention for relationships**

Strengthening marital satisfaction has become one of society's increasingly important goals in recent years. The effects of divorce have devastated children and families as well as permeated schools and community health care. It behooves the mental health field to find a means for decreasing marital distress and increasing marital satisfaction.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### *Marital distress.*

Amato, P.R. (2000) describes marital distress and divorce as associated with numerous adult psychological disorders, such as anxiety, depression, substance abuse, health problems, and increased negative life events. Children who experience divorce prior to age 6 are particularly at risk for developmental disruptions and maladaptive behaviors (Emery, 1999), while marital distress and divorce are associated with a host of child problems for all ages, including externalizing and internalizing behavior problems, poor academic achievement, and physiological problems (Cummings, E.M., & Davies, P.T., 1994). For adults the co-occurring relationship between marital distress and depression has been well documented (Fincham, Beach, Harold, & Osborne, 1997), & exists across all marital age groups (Cotton, 1999). Both depression and marital dissatisfaction have been shown to have negative effects on clients' physical health (Kiecolt—Glaser & Newton, 2001) as well as causing distressing behaviors, thoughts, and emotions, which disrupt marital, family, work, and other aspects of clients' lives (Kiecolt-Glaser, J.K., & Newton, T.L. (2001).

#### *Marital therapy.*

Marital therapy interventions have been primarily studied in laboratory settings using experimental quantitative evaluations. There have been fewer effectiveness studies using non-experimental designs in non-laboratory clinical settings. Addison, Sandberg, Corby, Mihaela & Platt

(2002) in a review of 15 years of clinical research argued that there is an urgent need for effectiveness studies showing therapeutic change in non-laboratory settings where clinicians normally treat clients. Sprenkle and Moon (1996) and Helmeke and Sprenkle (2000) advocated a changing perspective toward acceptance of both qualitative and quantitative research methods to increase understanding of change processes, outcomes, and effectiveness. Greenhalgh & Taylor, (1997) have proposed that a qualitative study emphasizes validity and the potential for the study to delve deeper into the more subjective arenas of core human experiences.

Marital therapy reviewers have also suggested common treatment factors rather than different modalities as new areas to be addressed (Shadish, Ragsdale, Glaser, & Montgomery, 1995; Hubell, Duncan, & Miller, 1999; Sprenkle, 2003). Gottman suggested (1993, 1994) that these treatment factors or requirements for a minimal marital intervention or prevention program are: a) communication patterns of couples listening and responding as well as problem solving, b) physiological arousal of individuals that may interfere with effective communication, and c) sufficient training to over-learn new skills to be utilized in emotional conflict.

Few studies have examined effectiveness of marital therapy interventions by analyzing participant handwritten descriptions at posttest to determine client views on aspects of marital therapy interventions that effected change in their lives. This study comprises the qualitative evaluation of handwritten posttest participant responses in a 12-year study of PAIRS, a psychoeducational relationship skill intervention, taught by 80 leaders in 29 geographic areas including the United States, Canada and France. The quantitative analysis, elucidated in another journal article, will be briefly described here under methodology.

### **INTERVENTION MODEL**

PAIRS (Practical application of Intimate Relationship Skills) is a 120 hour psychoeducational group treatment using a manualized multilevel process model of change. The model incorporates cognitive, behavioral, and affective techniques with the directive aspects of psychoeducation, and the

collaborative and supportive aspects of group work. Psychodynamic, object relations and attachment theories serve as the explanatory theories in the creation of marital satisfaction or discord while behavioral, cognitive and affective theories serve as change theories directing skill building, cognitive understandings, and emotional/insight oriented experiential exercises.

The PAIRS Mastery course, used for this study, includes a 609-page participants manual (Gordon, 2000), recommended books, and 120 hours of psychoeducation over 4-6 months. The course is divided into 1) communication skills, 2) conflict resolution skills, 3) self-understanding exercises and lectures including current brain research, 4) emotional experiential formats, 5) sensuality and sexuality consciousness-raising lectures and exercises, and a final 6) contracting weekend in which all the “tools” or skills are used for couples to create a vision for their future in the form of a relationship contract. The PAIRS Curriculum Guide for Leaders (854 pages) divides the course into 3 hour sessions specifically outlined with timing, lectures and exercises for uniformity of presentation, (Gordon, 1999).

### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

Using both grounded theory, content analysis, and analyses of researcher biases this qualitative study proposed to evaluate the participant handwritten end of course evaluations of the intervention model. Grounded theory allowed the researchers to approach the material with an open mind as to outcome regarding participant reactions to the model. Content analysis allowed for 1) in-depth evaluation of common collective responses and 2) observation of possible response relatedness to the common treatment factors described in the literature as necessary for an effective marital therapy intervention: a) communication and problem solving, b) emotional expressiveness, and c) time to over-learn skills. In addition, the qualitative analysis briefly evaluated the reactions and biases of the recording researcher and supervising researcher to the handwritten responses of PAIRS participants.

### **METHODOLOGY**

Embedded into a 12 year quantitative study of the intervention model were handwritten end of class evaluations by 765 of the more than 1800 participants who completed full or partial pre-test/posttest data between 1991 and 2003 from courses taught by 46 leaders to 80 groups in 39 locations

worldwide. Quantitative measures, paper and pencil instruments used were: 1) the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) (Spanier, 1976) for marital satisfaction; 2) the Relationship Pleasure Scale (Casriel, 1980) for marital satisfaction; and 3) the Relationship Change Scale (Guerney, 1977) for correlation with changes over the intervention time.

### *Qualitative Evaluation Design.*

Qualitative evaluation took place in three parts. Using grounded theory the narrative responses were recorded verbatim and evaluated for content. Using one question at a time responses were coded sequentially, classifying similar statements together from different respondents and categorizing them under various headings based on the premise of the question. If a response was not adequately related to an already formed category, then a new category was created. All previous responses were then reread to determine if they would be more appropriate with the new occurrence. All of the responses for each evaluation question were read at least 5 times to create accurate and descriptive categories for each piece of data. After organizing all responses to each question into various categories, the researchers determined how each category related to all others: whether some categories could be combined or if new categories needed to be created. The categories were then organized around their evaluation question.

Secondly, content analysis was used to quantify the preponderance of answers under each category, creating charts with percentages. The content analysis was then used to compare narrative responses with common factors of useful interventions according to the literature.

Thirdly, the recording and supervising researchers briefly evaluated their own responses to the narratives studying their own biases. All narrative answers were transcribed by one recording researcher (BB), who was completing his MSW program. The supervising researcher (LT) was an experienced marital therapist and intervention leader who had taught 16 PAIRS courses prior to the study. The third author (K B-S) provided advice and statistical analysis of the sample.

The data included narrative from participants describing in their own words responses to four open-ended questions. These questions were:

1. *Comment on the PAIRS seminar as a whole—what you liked, how the course could be improved, etc...*
2. *Comment on the leaders—what you liked, what each could do to be more effective?*
3. *What aspects of the PAIRS seminar helped you the most, what were the high points?*
4. *Are you interested in further sessions to reinforce and support the learning of PAIRS?*

#### *Sample.*

The qualitative sample of 765 participants from PAIRS classes in 29 different geographic areas between 1991 and 2003 provided responses to open-ended questions in their final class. Of this sample 197 (25.8%) did not complete demographic data or the quantitative measures at pretest and posttest. They were mostly married (74%), and almost equally divided by gender (46% male, 54% female). The mean age was 41.6 years old (S.D. = 8.6) with a range from 23 to 67. The mean years of education was just under 16.5 (S.D. 2.8) with a range from 9 to 28 years.

#### **Insert Table 1**

#### *Quantitative Results for Qualitative Sample*

The quantitative results for the qualitative sample that completed quantitative pre and posttest responses showed statistically significant improvement in marital satisfaction using the Dyadic Adjustment Scale total score. The mean DAS (overall marital satisfaction) at pre-intervention was 111.7 (n=314) and at post-intervention was 119.5 (n=450). The range of DAS scores at pre-intervention was from 2 to 158 and at post-intervention was from 9 to 161. The quantitative study of 159 couples (318 participants) showed a pretest mean of 115.49 (s.d.=15.1) and posttest mean of 125.23 (s.d.=13.9) suggesting that those who completed the qualitative open-ended questions were more distressed at pretest on average than those in the quantitative study.

#### *Grounded Theory*

The 765 participants in 29 geographic areas responded to from one to all of the four open-ended questions as part of the end of class evaluations. Transcribed were 2684 responses to the four qualitative

questions comprising 166 pages of narrative. Recording researcher was unfamiliar with PAIRS while recording responses. Prior to content analysis he attended a short PAIRS course with his fiancé.

### *Content Analysis*

*Observations. Question 1: Comment on the PAIRS Mastery Course as a whole: what you liked, how the course could be improved, etc?* The first question concerned participants' experience with the PAIRS Mastery Course in general asking respondents which aspects of the course they liked best as well as what they believed needed improvement. Question 1 was the most formidable to analyze due to the extent of the diverse information participants included in their responses. Therefore, it was divided into 3 parts: 1A) respondents' comments on PAIRS Mastery Course as a whole, 1B) aspects of PAIRS that participants liked, and 1C) aspects of PAIRS that could use improvement.

*Question 1A: Comments on the PAIRS Mastery Course as a Whole.* The responses were first categorized by determining whether participants' mentioned: a) All Positive things about PAIRS, b) Positive Aspects with Suggestions or c) Needed Improvements. A fourth category labeled Unsure was created to include the few responses that were unintelligible or did not posit an opinion either way. The results showed that for the 678 responses to this question: 275 (41%) were all positive, 325 (47%) were positive with suggestions, while 4 (1%) were unsure.

*Question 1B: What You Liked about the PAIRS Mastery Course?* For question 1B the categories of All Positive and Positive Aspects with Suggestions (600 total or 88%) were separated from the rest of the evaluation responses to determine which aspects of PAIRS were mentioned as being the most useful. There were multiple themes emerging from these responses and the complete list of categories is listed below with specific words and phrases in italics taken from participants' responses:

#### *Categories for 1B: What You Liked about the PAIRS Course?*

*Overall Integration/Approach:* phrases such as:

“as a whole PAIRS was excellent”, “excellent class overall”, “course progression was outstanding and comprehensive”, “coherent theoretical model”, “course exceeded all

expectations”.

*Growth/Change*: descriptors such as:

*“powerful effect on my relationship”, “changed my life”, “turning point in my life”,*

*“growth on the journey”, “enriched my life”, “enlightening”, “learning experience”,*

*“eye-opener”, “indispensable”.*

*Material/Information/Content*: respondents highlight usefulness of components such as, lectures, classwork, readings, and other material aspects of the intervention.

*Tools/Skills*: Responses note usefulness of components such as: communication tools and skills.

*Exercises/Experiential*: components highlighted such as fair fight, batwork, psychodrama, weekend experiences, emotional bonding.

*Group/Environment*:

*Leaders*: descriptors such as:

*“well-balanced” and “well-run”.*

*Time/Commitment*: descriptors such as:

*“just the right amount of time”, “put focus on our relationship”.*

Respondents who only reported that the course was excellent (unless they noted the course as a whole, overall, greater than the sum of its parts, etc. in which their responses were noted in the Integration/Approach category) were not placed in any of the categories because their responses were too general and already noted in Part 1A. Many respondents did not necessarily note specific aspects of the course that were the most effective for them, but gave a general impression of how the course changed their life or relationship overall. For these responses a new category labeled Growth/Change was created. To simplify the graph the categories are further broke into 4 areas in Table 2: Content, Structure, Integration/Approach, and Growth/Change.

*1B. What You Liked about the PAIRS Course?*

*Content:* 433 (64%)  
*Material/Information/Content:* 159 (23%)  
*Tools/Skills:* 139 (21%)  
*Exercises/Experiential Aspects:* 135 (20%)

*Structure:* 232 (34%)  
*Group/Environment:* 127 (19%)  
*Leaders:* 75 (11%)

*Overall Integration/Approach:* 190 (28%)

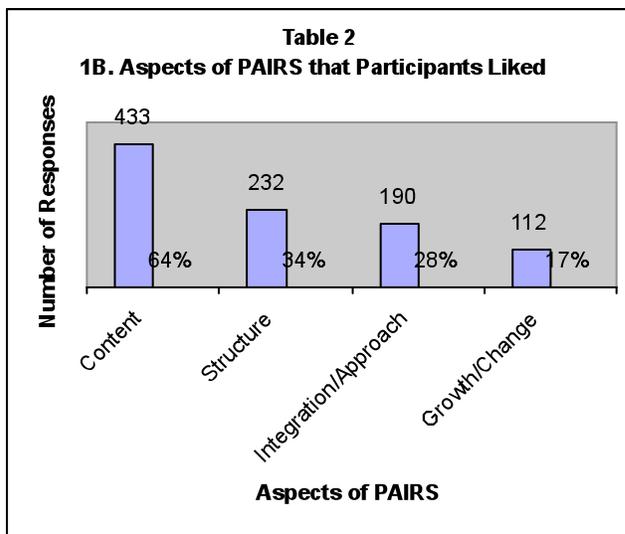
*Growth/Change:* 112 (17%)  
*Time/Commitment:* 30 (4%)

*Question 1C: How Could the PAIRS Course*

*Be Improved?* For question 1C the responses from b) Positive Aspects with Suggestions (375 or 47%) and responses from the category c) Needed Improvements (74 or 11%) were analyzed to determine specific aspects of the PAIRS course participants mentioned that could use improvement. During the categorization process specific components were highlighted which described needed improvements in the course. Because there was such a wide array of aspects noted with several themes emerging, the responses were divided according to descriptions of process-oriented or content-oriented aspects of PAIRS.

If the responses concerned some aspect of the program that was more related to the actual process of the program, such as time issues, format of sessions, group experience, etc...the categories were created accordingly and labeled under Process-Oriented Responses. Likewise, if the response related to the actual content of the program, such as the materials, exercises, workbook, lectures, etc, categories were created and labeled under Content-Oriented Responses. The responses are categorized accordingly below.

In the category of time there were equally opposing suggestions: 1) 52 people who felt that more time was needed to process all the material and exercises and 2) 48 people who would have preferred a more condensed course or fewer sessions. The rest of the categories and subcategories are listed below:



### 1C. How Could PAIRS Be Improved?

#### PROCESS-Oriented Responses

Time: 100 (15%)

More time needed: 52

Course needs to be condensed: 48 (6%)

Format of PAIRS: 109 (16%)

Pace and Format of sessions: 45 (6%)

Course Lacks Continuity: 33 (4%)

Didn't Enjoy Group experience: 31 (4%)

#### Content-Oriented Questions

Material: 200 (29%)

Suggestions about material: 45 (6%)

Too much material: 30 (4%)

Too Much Homework: 44 (5%)

Workbook Needs Improvement: 41(5%)

Lectures Need Work: 23 (3%)

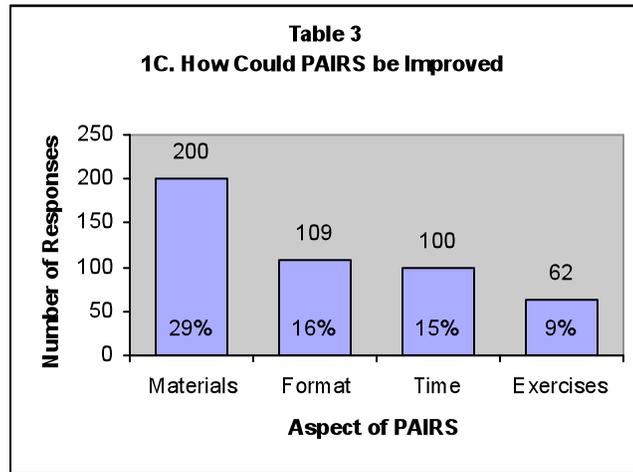
Videos: 17 (2%)

Exercises: 62 (9%)

Problems with Exercises: 22

Sexuality Weekend: 24

Bonding Weekend: 16



#### Question 2: Comment on leaders—what you like, what each could do to be more effective?

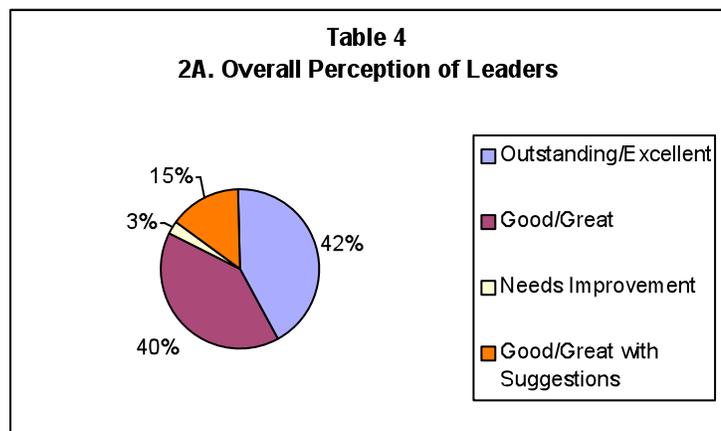
Question 2 pertains to participants' feelings regarding the PAIRS' leaders. During the review of responses, this question contained some of the more descriptive narratives within it. Question 2 was divided into 3 parts that include: 2A) participants' overall perception of leaders, 2B) aspects of leaders which were beneficial, and 2C) aspects of leaders that need improvement. Below is the summary of this process.

*Question 2A: Participants' Overall Perception of Leaders.* Every response was read and evaluated to determine how the respondent felt overall about the group leaders. This consisted of 692 responses, which were divided into 3 categories based on how each response summarized the leader: a) *Excellent/Outstanding*, b) *Very Good/Good*, and c) *Needs Improvement*. Some of the responses highlighted many good points, but also noted certain things that could be improved. To eliminate the overlap between the categories a new category of d) *Good/Great with Suggestions for Improvement* was created.

*2A. Overall Perception of Leaders*

Total: 692

- a) Outstanding/Excellent: 290 (42%)
- b) Good/Great: 279 (40%)
- c) Needs Improvement: 19 (3%)
- d) Good/Great w/ Suggestion: 104 (15%)



*Question 2B: Aspects of Leaders*

*that were Beneficial.* For part 2B, all of the 673 responses were reread to include the a) *Outstanding/Excellent*, b) *Good/Great*, and d) *Good/Great with Suggestions* categories (99% of Total Responses) to find similar themes emerging from the evaluations of the leaders. The 3 most evident reflections concerning PAIRS leaders pertained to: 1) leaders' *personal styles*; 2) leaders' *knowledge and understanding* of the material and relationships; and 3) leaders' ability to be *emotionally attuned* to participants.

As many participants mentioned multiple aspects of their leaders that they found helpful, all qualities noted were included. This seemed relevant and appropriate to the question, but caused considerable overlap between the categories. To acknowledge the respondents who mentioned all three aspects of leaders an additional category was created labeled All. Below is a list of words/phrases from specific responses that describe the content of each category in 2B:

## Categories for 2B: Aspects of Leaders that were Beneficial

*All:* Respondents who mentioned at least one thing from each category: “were exceptional instructors in knowledge, personal style, rapport and caring for each other as a team and are both extremely sensitive”.

*Emotional Attunement:* Descriptors such as “sensitive”, “rapport”, “affection”, “unconditional acceptance and care”, and “provide safe environment”.

*Knowledge/Understanding and Insight:* Descriptors such as “intelligent”, “knowledgeable”, “command of material and subject matter”, “insightful”, “perceptive”, “observant”, and “informative”.

*Personal Styles:* Descriptors such as: “worked well together”, “patient”, “flexible”, “complement each other well, professional, balanced, dynamic, effective, etc.

### 2B. Aspects of Leaders that were Beneficial

Total Number of Responses: 692

Personal Styles: 395 (57%)

Emotional Attunement: 355 (51%)

Knowledge & Insights: 332 (48%)

All of the Above: 138 (20%)

### Question 2C: Aspects of Leaders that Need

#### Improvement/Suggestions

For part 2C responses were reread to determine which aspects of the leaders could use improvement.

This consisted of the 123 responses, or 16% of the total responses, within the *Good/Great with*

*Suggestions* and *Needs Improvement* categories. After reviewing these responses multiple times the

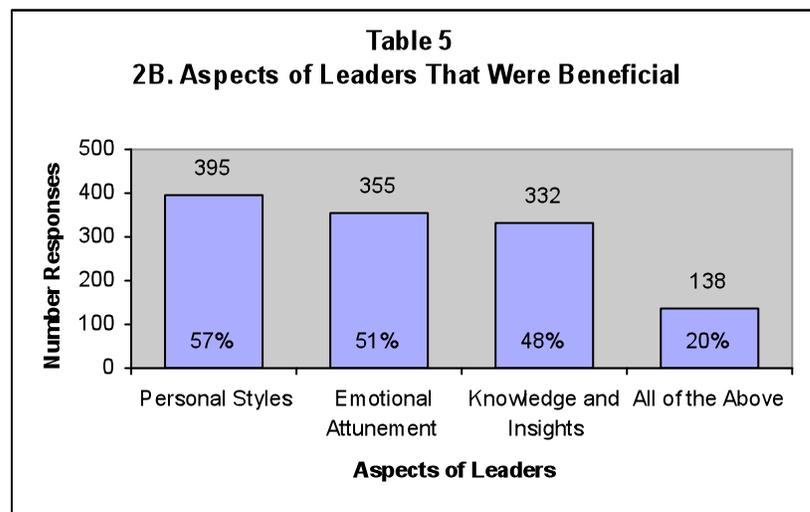
categories of *Format/Structure of Class*, *Pace/Clarity/Organization of Leader*, *Leadership Style*, and

*Time Issues* seemed to be the most descriptive and generalizable to the majority of responses. Unlike the

responses in 2B, however, most participants only recorded one particular aspect of leaders that could be

improved, and therefore there is no overflow between the categories. Below are participants’ examples

from each category:



## Categories for 2C: Aspects of Leaders that Need Improvement/Suggestions

**Format Structure of Class:** *more exercises on fewer topics, lack of structure*

**Leadership Style:** *coordination needs some improvement, needs to be more confident*

**Pace/Clarity/Organization:** *occasionally rushed, not clear in instructions, somewhat disorganized*

**Time Issue:** *end within 5 or 10 minutes of scheduled time, more emphasis on punctuality.*

### 2C. Aspects of Leaders that Need Improvement/ Suggestions

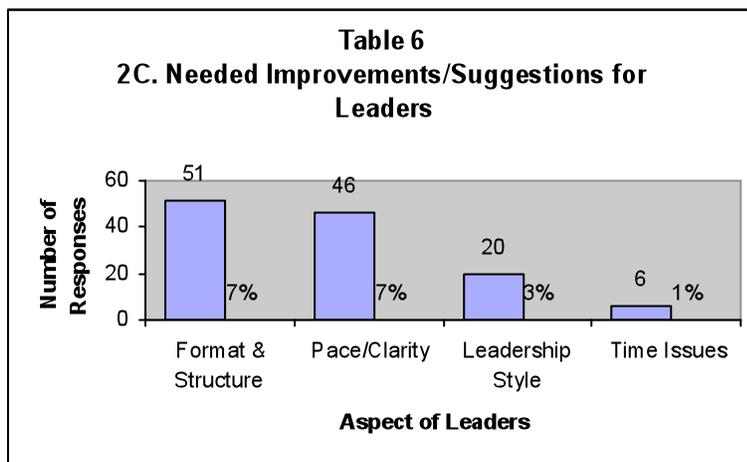
Total Number of Responses: 123 (16%)

Format/Structure of Class: 51 (7%)

Pace/Clarity/Organization: 46 (7%)

Leadership Style: 20 (3%)

Time Issues: 6 (1%)



### QUESTION 3: What Aspects of PAIRS Mastery Course Helped You the Most, What Were the High Points?

For question 3 every participants' response (676 responses total) was analyzed and every aspect of PAIRS that subjects noted as being helpful was recorded. These numbers and percentages are shown under question 3A (Table 7). For 3B specific aspects of PAIRS were categorized based on whether it consisted of an emotional component, behavioral component, and/or cognitive component of the course. Finally, for question 3C the actual number of aspects each participant noted as being a high point was recorded.

### 3A. Specific aspects participants found most useful in the PAIRS Mastery Course.

Within question 3A participants mentioned a total of 27 specific aspects of PAIRS that they found the most helpful. The majority of participants mentioned multiple aspects of PAIRS they found useful producing a total of 1582 responses for all the categories. These categories are listed below in table 7, along with the number responses and percentages.

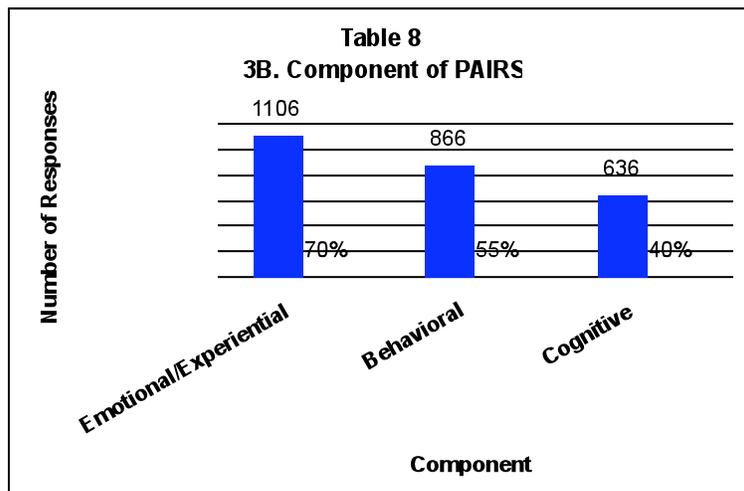
**3B. Aspect of PAIRS found most useful broken down into Emotional/Experiential, Behavioral, and/or Cognitive component.**

For part 3B each aspect of the PAIRS Mastery Course that participants mentioned was coded into 3 categories based upon whether it could be recognized as an *emotional/experiential* component of PAIRS, a *behavioral* tool, or a *cognitive* aspect of the program. PAIRS emphasizes the integration of these 3 modalities (emotional, behavioral, and cognitive) throughout the program, and accordingly many aspects of PAIRS include more than one component as can be seen from the table.

Table 4

**3B. Aspect of PAIRS found most useful broken down into Emotional/Experiential, Behavioral, and/or Cognitive component.**

Total Number of Aspects Noted:  
 1582  
 Emotional/Experiential: 1106 (70%)  
 Behavioral: 866 (55%)  
 Cognitive/Lecture: 636 (40%)

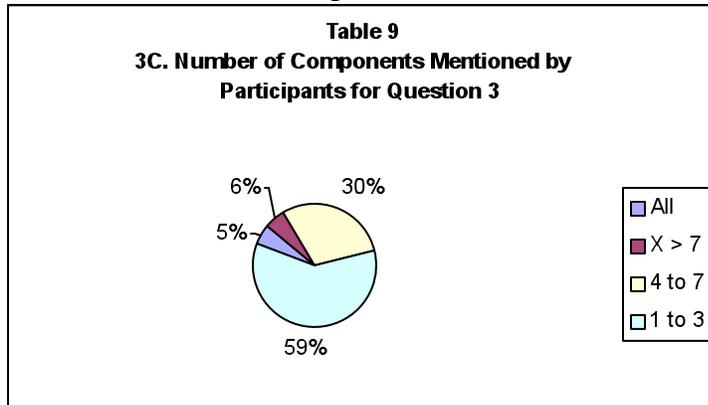


### 3C: Total Number of Aspects Mentioned as Useful for Each Participant

For part 3C the responses were reread and the number of different useful aspects each participant noted in their response was coded: participants who noted *1-3 aspects*, *4-7 aspects*, *over 7 aspects*, or stated *All*. The numbers and percentages are listed below.

### 3C: Total Number of Aspects Mentioned for Each Participant

All: 35 (5%)  
X > 7: 41 (6%)  
4-7: 203 (30%)  
1-3: 393 (59%)

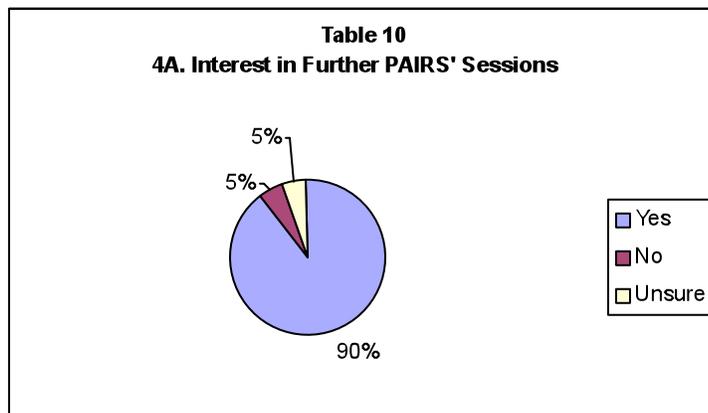


### Question 4: Are you interested in any further sessions to reinforce and support the learning of PAIRS?

The fourth and final question inquired into whether PAIRS participants would be interested in any type of PAIRS' sessions after the original PAIRS Mastery Course had concluded. These responses were broken up into the exclusive categories of *Yes*, *No*, or *Unsure*. The number of respondents who specifically referred to wanting 'alumni groups' was also noted within the *Yes* category.

### 4A: Interest in Further Sessions of PAIRS

Total: 638  
Yes: 570 (90%)  
    Alumni: 218 (34%)  
No: 34 (5%)  
Unsure: 34 (5%)



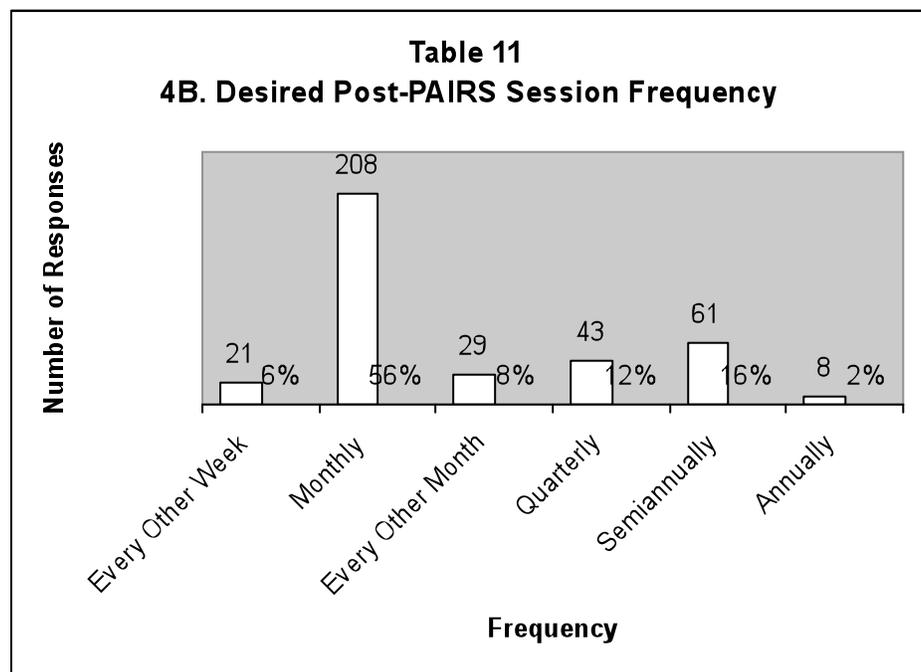
### 4B: How Frequently Participants would like to meet for more sessions

For the second part of question 4, the respondents who had answered *Yes* for further PAIRS sessions were reviewed. Many of these participants also included the frequency with which they would like to continue PAIRS sessions. These responses were categorized accordingly as *Annually, 2X/Year, Quarterly, Every Other Month, Monthly, or Every Other Week*. Below are the numbers and percentages of these responses.

**4B. Frequency of Sessions from Participants who responded Yes to Question 4**

Total Responses Regarding Frequency: 370

- Every Other Week: 21 (6%)
- Monthly: 208 (56%)
- Every Other Month: 29 (8%)
- Quarterly: 43 (12%)
- 2X a Year: 61 (16%)
- Annually: 8 (2%)



**Evaluation of Researcher Biases**

**Recording Researcher Narrative**

I originally became involved in this project through one of the professors in my Masters in Social Work program at the Catholic University of America. I knew nothing about the PAIRS Relationship Mastery Course or *A Center for Relationships*, and my interest lay solely in gaining research experience in the mental health field. During the first stages of the project, however, while I was still transcribing the many responses for each evaluation question, I found myself continually reflecting on the data. I would quite often pull aside the Supervising Researcher to discuss different aspects of the PAIRS

Mastery Course and different reflections I found in the responses that seemed significant to me. I became intrigued while reading the 2,684 responses, and it was these personal reflections which first piqued my interest in the whole PAIRS process. I was not only taken aback by the amount of personal information each participant shared, but also by the eloquence and depth with which many responses were felt.

As I entered the hand-written answers to the open-ended questions, two other students were entering the numerical data for statistical analyses in the parallel quantitative study. I began to feel that the quantitative data comprised a skeleton evaluation of the program, while understanding the heart and soul of PAIRS seemed to be located within the personal narratives and candid responses I was recording.

I often found that the responses were written by someone who seemed familiar to me, whether it was a parental figure, a sibling, or even myself. Many raw emotions surfaced during these times and I would occasionally feel notes of sadness and despair while reading participant responses that reflected personal anguish in the face of relationships from childhood to the present. These sensations were created not simply from an empathetic attunement to these individuals' struggles, but rather from what I felt resonating within my own life. Often it clarified the absent emotional connection I have experienced much of my life.

At the same time that many of these buried feelings within myself were manifesting, I also felt a strong breeze of freshness and hope as I read what these respondents had attained through PAIRS. Many of the participants on this journey had awakened to a brighter reality, were optimistic about what they had discovered, and committed to changes in their personal and interpersonal lives. Respondents noted not only finding their love renewed or *newly-found once again* with their partner, but also describing how much awareness had been brought to their intrapersonal life and the interaction between the two worlds.

Though I often felt that my personal difficulties were unique to my own life, reading through the thousands of responses highlighted many of the common areas in which relationships struggle and the similar difficulties that we all share. Many couples in the PAIRS Relationship Mastery Course also noted this phenomenon in their evaluations and how they found it to be an extremely enlightening experience to be with other people facing comparable challenges on this journey. The PAIRS study and the sincerity of participants' reflections created an invaluable learning experience for me and has undoubtedly continue to be influential for me in my personal and professional life.

PAIRS is not an easy solution or a quick alleviation for relationship difficulties. The program goes much deeper than communication tools, emotional/insight exercises, and skills training. There are pivotal aspects of the program that help participants transcend past emotional and attitudinal relationship blocks and nourish the seeds to recreate a new reality for the relationship. The most noted components found throughout the evaluations are the leader/participant dynamic and the emotional/experiential exercises. Like all other therapies, the intervention is not a simple panacea, but takes significant effort, commitment, and love on the part of the participants to reap the full benefits of the program.

### **Supervising Researcher Narrative**

A second year MSW internship with Lori Gordon, PAIRS founder, in 1990 was my introduction to the PAIRS program as I attended a course lead by Dr. Gordon . I was startled by the comfort with which all participants, but particularly men, described emotion and details of their relationships and relating.

As I listened to the lectures on individuation or transactional analysis and did exercises with participants who were struggling to communicate and resolve conflict by saying things they'd never said to each other, I began to see how unconscious I had been in my own marital relationship. I became aware of my desire to be heard and seen in my marriage and became aware of my parents' relationship deficits before their divorce when I was 17. By the end of the PAIRS course I was fairly certain that my marriage would not survive, as my husband was not interested in PAIRS or relationship skills. Less than

a year later I left the marriage, fully aware of what had worked, what had not worked, and what I wanted in a relationship. Perhaps even more important, I was much more conscious of myself.

Professionally PAIRS taught me many tools and skills to use with couples and singles regarding relationship issues. Subsequent to attendance as a participant/student I took the PAIRS leader training with Gordon and continued to train with her for another year before teaching my first PAIRS course in 1991. Since that time, I have taught 10 semester long PAIRS courses and 6 shorter versions of PAIRS with an attrition rate of less than 10% over 15 years, and a marital separation rate of less than 20%. It has become an integral part of my private practice and I have trained psychotherapists to teach PAIRS.

Couples who were difficult to treat in individual sessions were able, in the PAIRS classes, to use the skills and teachings as well as the experiential exercises to improve their relationships both inter and intra personally. Very difficult clients enjoyed the group/family aspects of the classes. Insights were spontaneous and the learning took place not only from leader to participant, but between participants. Both in my observations as well as in participant reports the PAIRS classes were able to improve marital satisfaction more durably and faster than in individual couple sessions.

Having an interest in research, I was eager to study PAIRS classes over time with both quantitative and qualitative methods. I conducted a preliminary quantitative evaluation of PAIRS in 1991, after training to teach PAIRS but prior to leading a course. It showed statistically significant positive results in marital satisfaction improvement from pre to posttest for 80 participants. My doctoral dissertation (Turner, 1998) compared 75 PAIRS participants with 45 controls. The Dyadic Adjustment Scale and Social Support Scale showed statistically significant improvement in marital discord for the participants but not for the controls, with the improvements correlated to improvements in social support. Using grounded theory and content analysis in this project has allowed us to listen to participants' reactions to the PAIRS course in their own words.

## **Discussion**

While the quantitative results showed statistically that over the course of the PAIRS program couples significantly improved their marital satisfaction regardless of their marital distress, these results did not tell us where or how the growth occurred. As leaders and practitioners we could make guesses, but only the participants could tell us about their personal experiences. The results of the content analysis of handwritten responses to each question will be discussed here.

**Question 1: Comment on the PAIRS Mastery Course as a whole: what you liked, how the course could be improved, etc.**

Validating the quantitative results, 87% of first question informants in the qualitative study mentioned mostly positive aspects of the program, 41% of the participants mentioned only positive aspects of the program overall, and 11% mentioned only negative aspects. Within the 11% who made only suggestions for improvements the highest number responded about materials, something that the PAIRS Foundation can use as a guide for possible improvements. Suggestions about time factors appear to be unimportant in that 52 people wanted more time and 48 people wanted less time in the course. It is surprising that only 9% of the participants expressed discomfort with some of the exercises as these treatments were meant to raise emotional issues, thereby creating discomfort.

While many participants mentioned the structure and content of PAIRS as positive aspects, 17% mentioned personal growth and change. This indicates that not only relational issues were addressed, but also intrapersonal. Underlying PAIRS relationship skill building is the psychodynamic theory that childhood issues have a major impact on marital discord. Therefore, many exercises and lectures address intrapersonal aspects of relating.

**Question 2: Comment on leaders – what you like, what each could do to be more effective?**

Leaders were described as *outstanding* (42%), *good/great* (40%), or *good with suggestions* (15%) by 97% of respondents. Three percent responded only with *suggestions for improvement*. Attributes that were appreciated were personal styles (57%), emotional attunement (51%), and

knowledge/insights (48%) or all of these (20%). Those with only suggestions for improvement mentioned format/structure (7%), pace/clarity (7%), leadership style (3%), and time issues (1%).

It would appear that the majority of leaders were able to establish an empathic rapport with participants while keeping them interested and attentive. This may have aided in encouraging client participation in communication and conflict resolution skill building as well as emotional exercises for self-understanding. Seemingly PAIRS leaders from geographically diverse locations were instructed well in the use of group process and dissemination of the PAIRS materials.

**Question 3: What aspects of the PAIRS Mastery course helped you the most, what were the high points?**

In question three all 27 components of PAIRS noted by respondents were recorded and given percentages according to how many included each aspect in their response to this question. By far the most mentioned component of the PAIRS program was the emotional bonding weekend (43%), part of the self-understanding section of the course. The emotional bonding weekend invited participants to delve into their deepest feelings about childhood and current and past relationships. The second most cited component of PAIRS was the Fair Fight For Change exercise (22%) that introduced couples to the most in-depth conflict resolution tool in the second weekend and again in the final, contracting weekend. Tied with 17% of responses were *communication skills, sexuality weekend and the Daily Temperature Reading (DTR)*. The DTR is the backbone of the PAIRS communication skills, teaching couples to share *appreciations, new information, puzzles, complaints with request for change and wishes hopes and dreams*. Together citing the DTR and communication skills would indicate that 34% of participants appreciated learning tools to communicate. Twenty-two other components of PAIRS were mentioned by respondents showing that they had internalized, found benefit from, and remembered exercises and areas of the PAIRS program.

Since the PAIRS program attempts to work not only cognitively and behaviorally with participants, but also emotionally, the 27 components mentioned were identified as having one, two or

all three of those treatment aspects. In describing which of these three aspects helped the most, respondents mentioned the emotional components of PAIRS more often than the cognitive or behavioral aspects. The second most useful aspect of the PAIRS program was identified by respondents as behavioral such as relationship skills. *Lectures* (3%) and *readings* (2%) were mentioned by only a small portion of respondents and PAIRS components containing cognitive aspects were mentioned the least as being helpful.

Since most marital therapy programs are based on cognitive/behavioral treatments for marital discord, PAIRS appears to be addressing an important aspect of relational difficulties which has been overlooked in many programs. Only Susan Goldberg's *emotion focused therapy* gives as much attention as the PAIRS program to this important aspect of relating.

**Question 4: Are you interested in any further sessions to reinforce and support the learning of PAIRS?**

Participants (90%) were overwhelmingly in favor of follow-on sessions using the PAIRS tools. The majority (56%) of these respondents wanted monthly sessions. Many PAIRS leaders have had monthly on-going PostPAIRS groups following the PAIRS courses. The supervising researcher of this study has had a PostPAIRS group meeting monthly since 1997. Some classes have formed such strong bonds that they meet monthly for a potluck dinner and use the PAIRS tools without a therapist leader. One such group, graduates of the supervising researcher, continued for four years after the PAIRS course ended and graduates are still in contact (15 years later).

Participants seem to form a family within the PAIRS classes and wish to continue the support both personally and for their relationships. This social support can be considered an important aspect of the PAIRS program. In an earlier study Turner (1998) found that participants, compared to their ability before PAIRS, were able to form statistically significantly closer bonds within the PAIRS class and outside the class with other groups at the end of the program. This result was correlated with the positive improvement in marital discord over the course of the PAIRS class.

This interest in continuing the PAIRS experience also indicates the power of the group aspect of PAIRS. Clients have told the supervising researcher that they have felt that they were re-constructing their family experiences in a positive family setting. The desire for follow-on monthly sessions also shows a commitment to their relationship and a belief in PAIRS and PAIRS leaders as effective assets.

### **Summary**

The PAIRS class was shown not only by quantitative results to improve marital satisfaction, but handwritten answers to open-ended questions at the end of the course showed that a majority of participants found the PAIRS program (87%) and its leaders (97%) to be helpful. In comparison to the cognitive and behavioral aspects, the emotional components of the PAIRS program were found to be the most useful and remembered of the many PAIRS components over the 120 hour course. Participants were overwhelmingly interested in continuing the PAIRS experience showing a continuing interest in using the tools and in being a part of a PAIRS community. It is interesting to note that while only 20% of participants mention exercises as something they liked about PAIRS in answer to the first question, they overwhelmingly mentioned PAIRS exercises, when asked what was most helpful in the third question. This may be due to their memories being aroused through various questions or due to the generality of the first question versus the specificity in the third question.

### **Limitations and Strengths**

Since qualitative research is necessarily subjective, many areas can be questioned. Content analysis depends on the independence and knowledge of the analysts. Questions asked and the wording of questions might change or limit answers. This study is therefore a subjective assessment of the PAIRS program both from the standpoint of the particular participants who chose to answer the open-ended questions, the leaders who encouraged and left time for these questions, and the researchers who analyzed and discussed the responses. Using grounded theory and inductive reasoning adds to the strength of the study, but repetition would increase validity.

Concerning wording, the first question could have been more open if it had been worded, “Comment on the PAIRS Mastery Course as a whole: what you liked, disliked, how the course could be improved.” Adding the word disliked might have encouraged more responses about discomforts in the course. Since 15% were able to make suggestions about improvements, this may not have been a strong deterrent to their openness about negatives concerning the course.

Having only two analysts in the content analysis may be a limitation of the study. Grounded theory was used to accept and observe all responses, looking for commonalities without pre-conceived ideas of outcome. The recording researcher had no investment in the PAIRS program when he began recording, as he had no relation to the course. The supervising researcher made suggestions at each stage of the content analysis development giving a second point of view.

The supervising researcher might have appeared to have an investment in the outcome of the study, but having completed three quantitative studies that showed statistically significant improvement in marital satisfaction for more than 400 PAIRS participants, she had already validated the quantitative usefulness of the course. Her interest lay in discovering the PAIRS components that had the most impact on participants. As a PAIRS leader of 16 classes, the supervising researcher brought experience and knowledge which could be used to examine the responses in light of extensive work with the actual PAIRS components. An outside researcher could not have known the many variables related to each PAIRS component such as time frame, emotional/behavioral/cognitive content, or timing in the course.

Another limitation might be the participant investment in viewing the PAIRS course as positive in light of the commitments of time and finances. The less than 10% attrition rate for those completing the supervising researcher’s 16 classes helps to mitigate this bias. Couples and singles seem to stay in the course despite its length and financial expense indicating its usefulness. A longitudinal study showing PAIRS effects over time would help to resolve this limitation.

## **Implications For Future Treatment and Research**

The high percentage of participant responses indicating the helpfulness of emotional exercises in the PAIRS program suggests the use of more emotionally directed treatments for marital therapy. The integration of emotional, behavioral, and cognitive treatments may increase the personal and marital growth of clients. Marital therapy which incorporates group practice of relationship skills was also found to be a useful method with couples showing an interest in on-going groups.

Qualitative research in a clinical setting appears to be a useful tool for gathering information concerning common treatment factors helpful to clients. The use of hand written open-ended questions with content analysis using grounded theory seems to offer information about client responses which cannot be gained from quantitative evaluations. Further research is also indicated for both emotional treatments for couples and for the integration of emotional/behavioral/cognitive therapies.

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**Table 1: Demographics**

	N	%
Gender		
Male	259	45.6
Female	309	54.4
Marital Status		
Single	94	18.5
Married	375	74.0
Widowed	8	1.6
Separated	19	3.7
Divorced	11	2.2
Level of Education		
High School or less	46	11.1
Some College	66	15.9
College	130	31.3
Advanced Degree	174	41.8

\* n does not equal sample size due to missing data.

1A: Comment on PAIRS Seminar as a Whole	N	%
Total Responses	678	
All Positive	275	41%
Positive Aspects with Suggestions	325	48%
Needed Improvements	74	11%
Unsure	4	1%

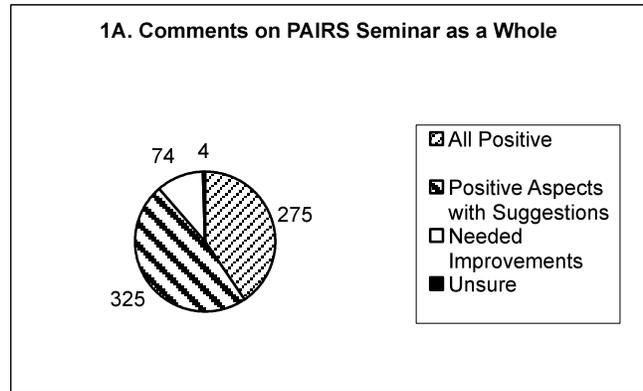
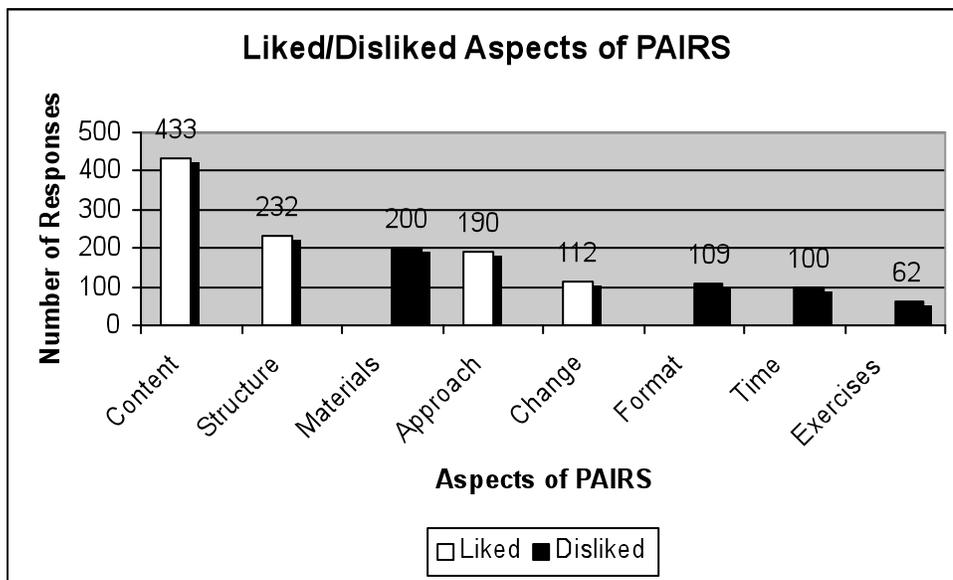


Table 2 - Comments on PAIRS Seminar as a Whole



**Graph 4**  
**Liked/Disliked Aspects of Leaders**

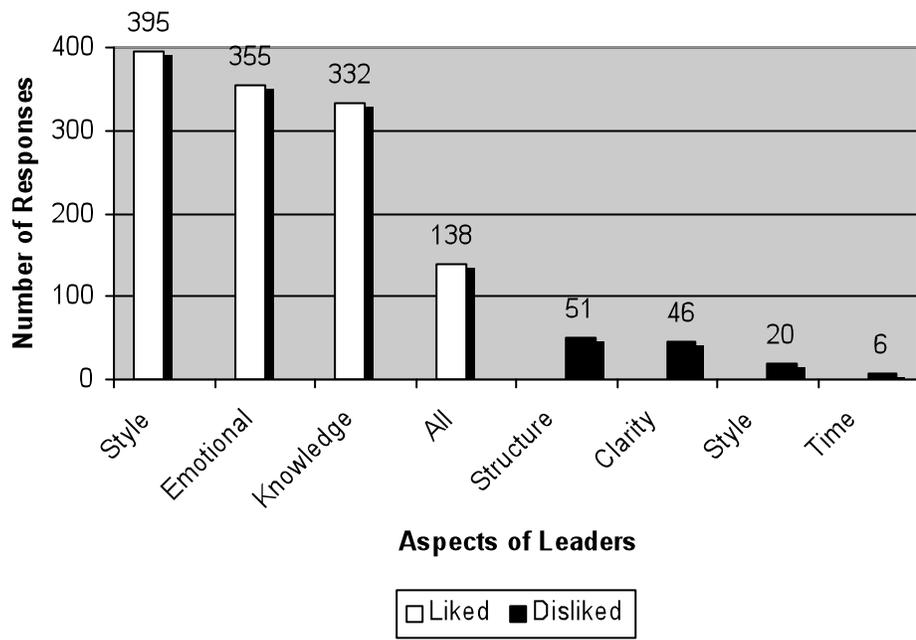


Table 4

3A. Noted aspects of PAIRS Mastery Course	Total Number of Responses	Percentages	3B. Component of PAIRS Emotional, Behavioral, and/or Cognitive
Emotional Bonding Weekend	292	43%	E
Fair Fight For Change	147	22%	EBC
Communication Skills	115	17%	B
Sexuality Weekend	114	17%	EBC
Daily Temperature Reading	112	17%	B
Dialogue Guide Tool	105	16%	B
Anger Ritual	73	11%	EB
Group Dynamics	70	10%	E
Contracting	69	10%	EBC
Parts of Self Exercise	65	10%	EC
Shared Meaning Tool	47	7%	EBC
Tool Application	46	7%	B
Emotional Bonding Tape	33	5%	E
Death & Dying Exercise	33	5%	E
Family of Origin	33	5%	EC
Same-Sex Group Discussion	33	5%	EC
Genogram	29	4%	C
Caring Behaviors	19	3%	B
Leaders	19	3%	EBC
Enneagrams	18	3%	C
Emotional Allergies	17	3%	E
Haircut	17	3%	E
Lectures	17	3%	C
Letting Go of Grudges Letter	17	3%	EC
Love Knots	14	2%	EC
Museum Tour of Hurts & Joys	14	2%	E
Readings	14	2%	C
Total Number of Aspects Noted	1582		

**Table 11**  
**4B. Desired Post-PAIRS Session Frequency**

