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## Relationship education among incarcerated populations

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### ABSTRACT

Incarceration represents a significant shift in the life course trajectories of the nearly seven million inmates in the American criminal justice system and their families and can have far-reaching effects on intimate and family relationships. Prior research has highlighted the relationship difficulties that inmates face while incarcerated and upon their release. Using a life course perspective, we review the disruptive impact of incarceration on relationships. We examine how relationship education targeted to incarcerated individuals may be an opportunity to provide knowledge and skills that help improve and maintain healthy relationships both during incarceration and upon release. Relationship education courses have consistently been shown to be effective within a variety of settings, and preliminary studies indicate that they may be effective within incarcerated populations as well.

### KEYWORDS

Incarceration; inmates; life course theory; recidivism; relationship education

## Introduction

It is estimated that in the United States, there are approximately 6.85 million inmates housed in federal, state, and local correctional facilities, or currently in the parole and probation system (Kaeble, Glaze, Tsoutis, & Minton, 2015). This means that the combined offender population in the United States would be larger than the populations of all but 13 states (Mackun, Wilson, Fischetti, & Goworowska, 2011). Incarcerated individuals are considered to be at a high risk for relationship dissolution, often have relatively less education and may come from low-income contexts (Apel, Blokland, Nieuwbeerta, & van Schellen, 2010; Lopoo & Western, 2005). A key aspect of the risk for relationship duress and dissolution is the significant disruption created in the life course of inmates and their families (Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999; Hairston, 2001; London & Myers, 2006).

In the general population, distress in couple relationships has been linked to negative outcomes for both adults and for children, including internalizing symptoms among adults (e.g., anxiety and depression; Whisman & Uebelacker, 2006), and internalizing and externalizing

symptoms among children (e.g., depression, delinquency; Buehler & Welsh, 2009).

In light of the concerns related to relationship dissolution (Amato, 2010), relationship education has become an increasingly common intervention to help promote healthy relationships (Hawkins & Fackrell, 2010). Relationship education imparts skills to encourage healthy relationships and has been found to be effective in diverse populations (Harcourt, Adler-Baeder, Rauer, Pettit, & Erath, 2017; Hawkins & Fackrell, 2010). However, the use of relationship education among incarcerated individuals is relatively new, and little is known about the potential processes and outcomes. The purpose of this article is to provide a theoretical and conceptual justification for providing relationship programming among incarcerated populations, and explore its feasibility. To begin, we describe the current state of the correctional system within the United States and the inmates involved. Next, using a life course perspective, we review research on risk factors related to incarceration. Finally, we review nascent research on incarcerated individuals and discuss how relationship education might be used more prevalently to help support healthy relationships for coupled individuals, and to increase the health of future relationships among single individuals. We focus generally on couple relationship education for single and coupled individuals, but acknowledge there is relevance to other types of family life education as well (e.g., parent education, financial education).

### **Incarcerated individuals in the United States**

From 1970 to 2006, it was estimated that the nation's incarcerated population rose more than 500% (Mauer & King, 2007). Programming and services for imprisoned individuals are on the decline, however (Mears, Cochran, Siennick, & Bales, 2012). The U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics approximates that about 1 out of every 36 American adults, or 2.8% of the population, is now in the correctional system (Kaeble et al., 2015), including federal, state, or local facilities, or parole or probation. This number has been in decline since 2007, although the decline is largely attributed to a decrease in the probation population (Glaze & Herberman, 2013; Kaeble et al., 2015).

Incarcerated people are diverse and comprise of a wide array of backgrounds, but sometimes share demographic similarities, and frequently share intra- and interpersonal challenges that are typically disruptive to personal and family life. They tend to be male, relatively young, and come from underprivileged backgrounds. Generally, about 90% of incarcerated individuals are male (Lopoo & Western, 2005; Glaze & Herberman, 2013), and 80% of incarcerated admissions for 2012 were 44 years old and younger (Carson & Golinelli, 2013). Data from 2012 showed that from the United

States population, 1% of all males were incarcerated, including 2.8% of all Black males, 1.2% of all Hispanic males, and 0.5% of all White males (Carson & Golinelli, 2013). Black males who were between the ages of 30 and 34 were the largest group of incarcerated individuals in the United States in 2012 (Carson & Golinelli, 2013). However, the population of incarcerated women is growing, with an increase of 21% from 2000 to 2009, versus an increase of 15% among men (Mauer, 2013). Compared to White women ages 18–19, Hispanic women were twice as likely to be incarcerated, and the likelihood among Black women was three times as high (Carson & Golinelli, 2013).

Individuals often leave children when they enter into the correctional system. In 2007, over half of all men and women who were incarcerated were parents, which is an increase of 79% since 1991 (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). During the same time period, the number of incarcerated mothers increased by 122%. One in 43 American children had an incarcerated parent, including 1 in 15 Black children, 1 in 42 Latino children, and 1 in 111 White children (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). The relationships of incarcerated individual have gleaned increased interest among researchers in recent years (Lopoo & Western, 2005). Some studies suggest that strengthening family relationships may have a stabilizing influence on incarcerated individuals and decrease the likelihood of reoffending after release (Laub & Sampson, 1993; Leverentz, 2006; Mears et al., 2012; Mears, Wang, Hay, & Bales, 2008).

### **Incarceration from a life course perspective**

The life course perspective analyzes how various life occurrences affect the prospective decisions of the individual, and how, in turn, their decisions influence their future opportunities. Giele and Elder defined the life course as a “sequence of socially defined events and roles that the individual enacts over time,” (1998, p. 22). In describing the contextual influences on the life course choices presented to each of us, Elder (1998) noted that the array of choices is different for each individual and that opportunities and constraints vary according to social structure and culture. Thus, some individuals have relatively more options and are more able to select their paths; others have considerable social and contextual limitations, and thus fewer viable paths (Elder, 1998).

Within American culture, Hogan (1978) identified formal schooling or training, full-time employment, and forming a family as major components of successful adulthood. Significant events that interrupt these elements can generate disharmony between the individual’s direction and the life course created within his or her social infrastructure (Hogan, 1978), and negative

relational impact (Giele & Elder, 1998), such as increased likelihood of separation or divorce (Apel et al., 2010). Although outside the scope of the current article, there is important work that identifies the mechanisms of cumulative advantage versus disadvantage, including family and cohort processes, issues related to age, gender, ethic/racial and socio-historical events, and structural and institutional processes (Dannefer, 2003).

Incarceration represents a significant disruption in the lives of those in the system, which can dramatically affect their life trajectories (Pettit & Western, 2004). From a life course perspective, incarceration may have impact on any or all of the theory's five key principles, including development (realization of growth potential), agency (choice), time and geographical place (context of development), timing of decisions, and linked lives (Elder, 1998; Giele & Elder, 1998). Here, we give particular emphasis to linked lives, with specific attention to incarceration's impact on intra- and interpersonal aspects of couple relationships. We then discuss the potential of relationship education as one way to proactively mitigate the disruption.

### **Incarceration as a life course disruption**

For those already on difficult trajectories, incarceration in adulthood often serves to further exacerbate the deviation from a socially defined life course and continues to alter their trajectories and have a negative impact on success in family and work life (Huebner, 2005). Incarceration often delays or disrupts individuals' taking on the roles of spouse and parent, both temporally and in terms of life trajectories (Pettit & Western, 2004). In their discussion of young adult offenders and the various predictors of their success upon reentry into society, Uggen and Wakefield (2003) noted that youth who did not attain the normative life course transitions related to school, work, and family were more likely to be persistent offenders. Criminal behavior has also been associated with interpersonal functioning in areas related to relationship success such as social skills, anger and impulse control, stress management and coping skills, empathy, and social problem solving (Bourke & van Hasselt, 2001).

For former inmates, delay into partnering and parenting can have several sources. One source is lower initial wages and the tendency to experience slower rates of wage growth, which may lead to lower desirability or marriageability as a partner (Western, 2002). Conversely, Laub and Sampson (1993) described marital investment as a reciprocal process between spouses, and noted that when it is successful, the strength of the social relations within the family encourages desistance from crime. Inmates who were found to maintain family relationships while incarcerated were less

likely to reoffend or violate parole after release (Maldonado, 2006). There is a normalizing effect on a former inmate's life trajectory upon successfully completing life course transitions such as gaining employment, or maintaining a successful relationship, which has been associated with criminal desistance (Hagan, 1993).

Relationship deficits may exist prior to entering the correctional system (Bourke & van Hasselt, 2001), but some of the behaviors and attitudes adopted during confinement to endure incarceration may also present stumbling blocks to reintegration into society after release (Apel et al., 2010). The effects on relationship skills may be seen in intimate relationships both during and after incarceration. Incarceration negatively affects the likelihood of being married before the age of forty: Nearly 40% of formerly incarcerated men do not marry compared to 10% of their never-incarcerated peers (Western, 2006). Moreover, formerly incarcerated fathers were 40% less likely than never incarcerated fathers to be married to the mother of their child within a year of the child's birth (Western, Lopoo, & McLanahan, 2004).

For those in couple relationships, incarceration is associated with relationship duress as well as an increase in the risk of divorce or separation (Apel et al., 2010; Hairston, 2001; Lopoo & Western, 2005). Additionally, having an incarcerated parent is a significant risk factor for poor child outcomes (Braman & Wood, 2003; Herman-Stahl, Kan, & McKay, 2008). These negative relationship outcomes are particularly troubling in light of evidence that those who fail to attain strong family ties and consistent employment (both of which are influenced by relationship skills) are more likely to reoffend and return to incarceration (Pettit & Western, 2004). Relationship education is a logical way to provide incarcerated individuals with foundational skills needed to support healthy family relationships (Hawkins, Carroll, Doherty, & Willoughby, 2004). Even though not all inmates are in intimate relationships, the skills and principles taught in relationship education are important in many types of interpersonal relationships, including those in the workplace (Lindquist, McKay, & Bir, 2012).

### **Relationship education**

Relationship education encompasses a variety of programs used to teach skills and principles to inform relationship choices and improve relationships (Markman & Rhoades, 2012). Although the curricula and program parameters vary from program to program, relationship education programs tend to be preventative in nature. Relationship education is a general term that may refer to couple and relationship education (CRE;

Lucier-Greer & Adler-Baeder, 2012), marriage and relationship education (MRE; Hawkins et al., 2004), or even youth relationship education (YRE; Hawkins, 2018). These programs generally consist of two core components. First, they are often designed to teach communication and problem-solving skills central to a healthy relationship. Second, they provide training and education on relationship processes that support relationship quality, such as compatible expectations, commitment, and forgiveness. According to Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin, and Fawcett (2008), most relationship education programs combine the two components and place heavy emphasis on communication skills. Relationship education differs from couple therapy in terms of format and couple needs: Relationship education curricula are typically manualized and taught in workshop settings to a variety of couples, whereas couple therapy is typically offered in an office setting by one therapist who tailors treatment to a single couple experiencing relational distress (Markman & Rhoades, 2012). Relationship education is primarily designed to teach relationship skills in order to both prevent problems before they form and to correct relationship issues before they grow to the degree that therapy is needed (Hawkins et al., 2004). Generally, then, relationship education is appropriate for individuals both during incarceration and after release.

### **Effectiveness of relationship education**

Across a variety of curricula and delivery formats, relationship education has been shown to increase communication skills and relationship quality among program participants. Stanley, Amato, Johnson, and Markman (2006) found that married participants in relationship education were 31% less likely to divorce and more likely to have higher marital quality and commitment compared to non-participants. In a meta-analysis of 86 reports, Hawkins and colleagues (2008) found that participation in relationship education had a positive impact on communication skills ( $d = .43$  to  $.45$  in experimental studies) and on relationship quality ( $d = .30$  to  $.36$  in experimental studies). They also found that these effects did not diminish significantly between post-assessment and follow-up assessments (3- and 6-month follow-ups were most common). In comparing the effect sizes of relationship education courses with other prevention programs, Hawkins et al. (2008) noted that their derived scores were similar in range of effects to other preventative intervention programs reported in Lipsey and Wilson (1993), including parent effectiveness training, adolescent pregnancy preventions, and alcohol and drug abuse prevention programs. However, they noted a lack of studies focused on disadvantaged couples, including those

from diverse racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds. This lack of research is notable, because scholars have questioned the extent to which relationship education programs might be effective with low-income and diverse participants due to the potential effects of social and economic stressors (Huston & Melz, 2004; Ooms & Wilson, 2004).

Although there is little research on relationship education among incarcerated individuals specifically, recent research generally suggests that relationship education is effective among individuals with diverse needs. For example, a meta-analysis including 14 evaluation studies of the impact of stepfamily education on family, parental, and couple functioning yielded average effect sizes of  $d = .20$  to  $.23$  (Lucier-Greer & Adler-Baeder, 2012). In addition, research suggests relationship education is effective among low-income participants. In one meta-analysis of 15 studies targeting lower-income couples (at least double the federal poverty rate), relationship education had a positive effect on relationship quality ( $d = .25$  to  $.29$ ). Hawkins and Fackrell (2010) found the effect sizes noteworthy given the stresses and strains associated with lower-income contexts. In a more recent meta-analysis, Hawkins and Erickson (2015) reviewed 38 studies of relationship education among lower-income participants (at least double the federal poverty rate). Relationship education was found to have small but positive effects on both communication skills and relationship quality (overall  $d = .06$ ;  $d = .09$  for studies with more married couples; Hawkins & Erickson, 2015). These small effect sizes are noteworthy given the stressors of lower-income contexts, and that the majority of the couples were relationally distressed in at least one-third of the studies' samples (Hawkins & Erickson, 2015). Relative to outcome studies of middle-class participants, these data suggest that relationship education has modest but significant impact.

Relationship education courses have also been found to be effective with individual participants. An evaluation among single, emerging adults showed gains in relationship and partner selection skills following participation in a course designed for participants not in a committed relationship (Bradford, Stewart, Pfister, & Higginbotham, 2016). Similar effects were found in a study that measured relationship education outcomes for low-income single participants (Bradford, Spuhler, Higginbotham, Laxman, & Morgan 2018). Harcourt et al. (2017) showed an increase in conflict management skills for incarcerated participants, both single and coupled individuals, after participating in relationship education. This small study highlights the potential effectiveness for programs for incarcerated participants, regardless of their relationship status. More research on the impact of relationship education among incarcerated individuals is needed, but findings from extant literature are encouraging.

## Prioritizing relationship education for incarcerated individuals

Education programs within the correctional systems of the United States got their start in the 1930s in an effort to reduce recidivism (Cecil, Drapkin, MacKenzie, & Hickman, 2000). Finn (1998) stated that incarcerated individuals often have important skill deficiencies other than reading and writing, such as employment skills, finance knowledge, anger management, and building and maintaining healthy relationships. Although various programs have at times been offered to support released individuals' reintegration into society (Cecil et al., 2000), few programs have been implemented to assist inmates in building and maintaining relationships after reentry (Haney, 2001). The correctional system reaches nearly seven million Americans (Glaze & Herberman, 2013). Thus, "Correctional facilities provide a unique and underutilized environment to improve inmate's abilities and to prepare them for return to their spouses, families and communities" (Einhorn et al., 2008). As Hawkins et al. (2004) stated: "The more an educational initiative attaches itself to an established setting that already serves individuals and couples, the greater its potential outreach" (p. 555). Despite differences in needs among individuals in various settings (e.g., jails, prison, parole) across different personal circumstances (e.g., single, coupled, parental status), the knowledge and skills provided by relationship education might help incarcerated populations to improve their life trajectories, if curricula and approaches are adapted appropriately.

Scholars have called for the integration of relationship education into a broader set of human services provided to individuals in multiple settings across the lifespan (Lindquist et al., 2012; see also Markman & Rhoades, 2012). For example, Hawkins and colleagues (2004) recommended that education be provided in common settings such as the workplace, schools, churches, and health care facilities—and possibly integrated into other curricula or services. Researchers have increasingly emphasized prevention, suggesting that education be offered relatively earlier to provide youth and young adults with research-based information to help them form healthy relationships from the start and avoid serious problems (Hawkins, 2018). Studies show that relationship education targeted to singles increases participants' knowledge about healthy relationship and realistic relationship beliefs (Adler-Baeder et al., 2007; Bradford et al., 2016). Such findings suggest that reaching vulnerable populations before they enter into long-term relationships may lead to stronger relationships. It may be, then, that the delays or disruption in relationships due to incarceration may actually create a window of opportunity for preventive intervention.

Teaching relationship skills to incarcerated individuals can provide them tools for better relationships (Haney, 2001), and such education may help mitigate life course disruption by fostering healthy relationships (i.e., linked

lives). Yet, as noted by Einhorn et al. (2008), “Despite the impact of incarceration on marriage and family stability, relationship enhancement and marriage education programs are rarely implemented in correctional facilities,” (p. 342). Nonetheless, improved relationships may lead to lower rates of recidivism among released inmates as strong relationships are associated with criminal desistance (Hagan, 1993; Laub & Sampson, 1993), but there are also benefits for inmates while they remain incarcerated. For example, Bayse, Allgood, and Van Wyk (1991) found that inmates who learned to repair and maintain positive family relationships experienced fewer disciplinary issues during their incarceration and lower rates of recidivism after their release. Notably, many inmates are interested in improving their relationship skills and their relationships with their partners, children, and other members of their family (Lindquist et al., 2012).

The nascent research investigating the impact of relationship education targeted to incarcerated individuals has yielded promising results. Initial studies show that relationship education has a positive impact among participants. Relationship education programs have been shown to help inmates develop relationship skills while they are incarcerated in order to strengthen current and future relationships (Harcourt & Adler-Baeder, 2015; Harcourt et al., 2017). Harcourt and colleagues (2017) also confirmed that the relationship skills positively influenced more relationships than the one that the program intended. This can be attributed to healthy relationship skills that are transferrable or to spillover effects, such as couple improvements positively associated with parenting functioning (Adler-Baeder et al., 2013). Harcourt and Adler-Baeder (2015) also suggested the potential benefit of facilitating relationship education among inmates. In their meta-analysis, Hawkins, Stanley, Blanchard, and Albright (2012) evaluated potential moderators of relationship education program effectiveness, such as dosage and programmatic emphasis, that should be considered when implementing education. Efforts to design programs for incarcerated individuals should consider moderators and common factors in relationship education that increase effectiveness.

### **Obstacles and solutions in working with inmates**

There are a number of challenges to delivering education to incarcerated populations in restrictive and regimented correctional systems. Correctional facilities are often large bureaucracies and as such, can pose challenges to program providers and researchers who are outsiders. Patenaude (2004) describes the challenges of outsiders gaining access to prisons by listing a series of hurdles and challenges that they will face. Gaining entry, establishing rapport, maintaining trust, providing feedback, and publications

limitations each present challenges to educators and researchers, but partnering with key personnel (e.g., jail commanders, associated community agencies, and clergy) can help provide access and possibly address additional needs (Futris, 2007). Through partnerships, inmates may gain transition assistance and continued relationship skill development upon release.

It may be possible to offer relationship education to individual inmates (either single or in relationships) and also to coupled inmates. Varying policies may or may not allow partners to attend conjointly, and thus providers may need to creatively devise ways to offer content to partners either in tandem (e.g., via computer if not in person) or separately. In addition, programing should be tailored to increase the efficacy for inmates through modifications such as using informal, concrete language, and using relevant examples (Lindquist et al., 2012). Scott and Rhoades (2014) provided an example of tailoring RE programs to participants' unique needs through their research with lesbian couples. Scott, Whitton, & Buzzella (2018) suggested program adaptations to remove personal and heterosexist biases to effectively teach individuals in same-sex relationships. Cultural sensitivity may also increase the quality and benefits of relationship education (Scott et al., 2018). Similar attention to inmates' unique needs should be taken when planning programing for incarcerated populations, including inmates in same-sex relationships. As discussed earlier, the incarcerated population of the United States is a diverse group. Relationship education within a correctional facility would likely consist of participants from a wide range of ages, cultures, and with large variations in family situations and life experiences. Thus, curricula in incarcerated settings may need to be adapted to fit a wide array of life circumstances and the restrictions of incarceration, while still being targeted enough to provide the relationships skills training needed by the participants.

### Examples of relationship education programs

There is a wide array of relationship education programs available to promote and sustain healthy marriages (Hawkins et al., 2008). Some have identified as being used within correctional systems (Lindquist et al., 2012). Below are a few examples of relationship education programs that have been used for either individuals or couples in an incarcerated setting.

**PICK.** The Premarital Interpersonal Choices and Knowledge (PICK) program is a relationship education program for premarital relationships (Van Epp, 2007). By examining the predictors of marital satisfaction and how to pace an intimate relationship, the participants receive information on choosing a compatible partner and useful tools in relationship building (Van Epp, 2007). In one study, Army soldiers showed an increase in

understanding premarital relationship dynamics, better understanding of healthy relationship “pacing,” and more realistic attitudes and beliefs about marriage and mate selection (Van Epp, Futris, Van Epp, & Campbell, 2008). In an exploratory study conducted within 11 county jails in a western state, inmates who participated in the PICK program reported significant post-test gains in their relationship skills and knowledge, and significant declines in their naïve relationship beliefs and endorsement or tolerance of controlling behaviors (Spuhler, Goodey, Bradford, & Higginbotham, 2018).

**PREP.** The Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) has been shown to increase skills within couple relationships including confidence, communication, friendship, and negative interactions within incarcerated individuals (Einhorn et al., 2008). PREP has been found to have positive impact within the correctional system (Einhorn et al., 2008). Inmates from 17 correctional facilities in Oklahoma participated in an adapted version of PREP, called PREP Inside and Out (Einhorn et al., 2008). The study consisted of 254 participants including, 116 males and 138 females, with 56% of the male participants and 29% of female participants being minorities (Einhorn et al., 2008). On average, the participants reported having more than two children and an education level of less than 12 years. These demographics showed a diverse population of men and women (Einhorn et al., 2008). The program consisted of a 2-hour class that met once a week for six consecutive weeks and was provided to the correctional facility at no charge (Einhorn et al., 2008). This was a voluntary class, except for those who planned to marry while incarcerated, and no incentives were offered (Einhorn et al., 2008). An ANOVA that treated time as a within-subjects factor and gender as a between-subjects factor was used to examine changes from the onset to the conclusion of the relationship course (Einhorn et al., 2008). Significant changes from pre- to post- were found with effect sizes between 0.19 and 0.81, which are considered to be effective compared to other impactful marriage education programs (Fawcett, Hawkins, & Blanchard, 2006). The key areas of relationship quality that showed improvement were communication skills, relationship confidence, relationship dedication, relationship satisfaction, friendship, and findings of lower levels of negative relationship interactions and in the participant feeling lonely (Einhorn et al., 2008).

**Together We Can.** *Together We Can: Creating a Healthy Future For Our Family* is a relationship education program for married and non-married participants that focuses on knowledge and skills needed for healthy couple and co-parenting relationships (Cox & Shirer, 2009; Shirer et al., 2009). The program is tailored to lower-literacy populations and addresses both individual and couple-level processes as a means to improve relationships

between couples. Evaluations of this research-based curriculum have shown increases in relationship satisfaction and trust, more effective problem solving, decreased relationship aggression, and improved co-parenting as improvements are made to the couple relationship (Cox & Shirer, 2009; Gregson, Adler-Baeder, Parham, Ketting, & Smith, 2012). Recently, Harcourt and colleagues (2017) evaluated the *Together We Can* program within an incarcerated population. Their analysis of data from 187 incarcerated adults found modest but significant improvements in several couple, individual, and parenting outcomes. They also found that relationship status was not a significant covariate with programmatic outcomes highlighting the value of RE programs for incarcerated participants regardless of current relationship status.

## Conclusion

We posit that relationship education tailored to the needs of incarcerated individuals could provide information and skills that facilitate linked lives, specifically through healthier relationships. From a life course perspective, individuals with social and contextual limitations often have fewer viable paths (Elder, 1998), and incarceration may delay or disrupt relationships (Lindquist et al., 2012). To the extent that this is true, however, the disruption created by incarceration may actually create a window of opportunity for access to relationship knowledge and skills that some individuals may not have had otherwise—if that window of time can be used productively. Relationship education may help foster stronger relationships both during incarceration and after release, which may also reduce the likelihood of reoffending (Hagan, 1993; Laub & Sampson, 1993).

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