

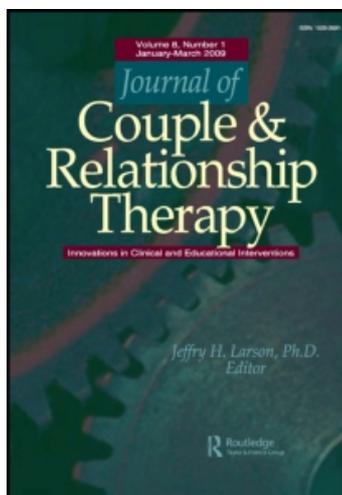
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Does Relationship and Marriage Education for Lower-Income Couples Work? A Meta-Analytic Study of Emerging Research

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While a large number of studies have documented how couple education programs can strengthen couple relationships, few studies have tested these programs on lower-income, higher-risk couples. Yet over the past decade, state and federal governments have been experimenting with supporting couple education programs designed to help lower-income couples form and sustain healthy marriages and relationships. This article reports the findings of a meta-analytic study of the effectiveness of couple education targeted to lower-income couples. We examined evaluation data from 15 programs and found small-to-moderate effects. For the three control-group studies, we found the overall effect of these programs was $d = .250$ ($p < .05$). For the 12 one-group/pre-post studies, we found the overall effect was $d = .293$ ($p < .001$). These effects are relatively similar to those found for MRE studies with middle-income participants and for studies of other family-support educational programs. Implications for couple educators are discussed.

KEYWORDS *couple education, marriage education, low-income couples, high-risk couples, meta-analysis*

While a large number of studies have documented how couple education programs can strengthen couple relationships (Blanchard, Hawkins, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2009; Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2008), few studies have tested these programs on lower-income, higher-risk couples (Ooms & Wilson, 2004). Yet over the past decade, state and federal

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governments, as well as other institutions, have experimented with supporting couple education programs designed to help lower-income couples, who are at greater risk for relationship difficulties, form and sustain healthy marriages and relationships. Stronger and more stable marriages and relationships may help many couples be more self-sufficient and improve the well-being of children in those families (Amato, 2005; Cherlin, 2009).

This report brings together emerging information on the effectiveness of couple education programs for lower-income couples in a meta-analytic study. Meta-analysis is a rigorous technique for combining the findings from all studies on a particular topic—in this case, the effectiveness of couple education for lower-income couples—to determine the overall or average effect. While individual studies report individual program results, meta-analysis systematically combines the results of all comparable evaluation studies by standardizing outcome measures and aggregating them into an effect size that expresses the magnitude of the difference between treatment and comparison groups or the improvement of a single group after treatment.

Early process evaluation studies have shown that lower-income couples are attracted to well-designed couple education and enjoy participating in these programs (Dion et al., 2008; Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, 2006, December). A few recently published studies have evaluated the effectiveness of programs for lower-income couples (Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, Pruett, & Wong, 2009*; Cox & Shirer, 2009*; Stanley et al., 2005*). Also, a significant amount of unpublished research in this area now exists. A number of Healthy Marriage Initiative (HMI) demonstration projects funded by state and federal governments have been collecting program evaluation data on important outcomes such as relationship quality and communication and problem-solving skills. But analysis and reporting of these data have been slow in coming, as results are considered preliminary given that most of the projects have 5-year plans.

The U.S. Administration for Children and Families (ACF) is currently funding three long-term, large-scale, rigorous HMI demonstration projects: Building Strong Families (BSF, targeted to lower-income, unmarried parents), Supporting Healthy Marriages (SHM, targeted to lower-income, married couples), and the Community Healthy Marriage Initiative (testing community support models for strengthening marriages in lower-income communities). BSF and SHM use an experimental random assignment design. These projects over time will yield valuable information about the potential of couple education services to help lower-income, higher-risk couples form and sustain stable, healthy relationships and families. Published outcome evaluation studies from these major, long-term demonstration projects, however, are still over the horizon. Moreover, these large-scale demonstration programs

* Study included in meta-analysis.

have received high levels of public funding to support an intensive array of supportive services over a longer period of time; such models will be hard to replicate widely in the field.

Yet there are important reasons for wanting to get an early picture of the results of less resource-intensive programs and initiatives targeted to lower-income couples. First, analyses of early results could provide encouragement to ongoing efforts of other federal, state, and local HMI practitioners. In addition, during a time of federal administrative transition and federal and state budget restrictions, administrators will be seeking to know as much as possible about the HMI projects for lower-income couples and individuals, including early assessments of the effectiveness of these programs. A systematic review of the available information—most of it still unpublished—can provide preliminary evidence about the efficacy of these programs. Finally, commentators have justifiably raised the question of whether couple education will be effective for lower-income, higher-risk couples who have more diverse family situations and economically and socially stressful lives (Huston & Melz, 2004; Ooms & Wilson, 2004). Thus, an early look at couple education targeted to lower-income, higher-risk couples would address an important research and policy question. A rigorous synthesis of available data using meta-analytic methods will provide policy makers and practitioners timely information that is useful for making informed decisions regarding these initiatives and address an important research question currently facing couple education researchers.

METHODS

Search Procedure and Inclusion Criteria

We conducted an extensive search for reports of couple education outcome evaluation research that focused on lower-income adult individuals and couples. We defined *lower-income* as an income less than twice the federal poverty rate. For a family of four, the poverty line is about \$22,000. Studies in which at least two-thirds of participants were lower-income were included in the study. Several included studies had only lower-income participants. Similarly, a few studies had almost exclusively nonwhite participants; for others, usually about half the participants were nonwhite.

We started our search for studies by identifying potential studies that met our criteria from recent comprehensive meta-analyses (Blanchard et al., 2009; Hawkins et al., 2008). We also searched electronic databases for more recent research. We contacted many active researchers in the field who are doing work in this area. In addition, we contacted a number of federal HMI grantees who were thought to be collecting some kind of program evaluation data on lower-income participants. While all grantees are collecting basic participant demographic and usage information and many are collecting participant

satisfaction data, we searched for grantees that were also collecting outcome data. We did not contact all federal HMI grantees, however, so it is possible that we missed a few unpublished reports from grantees that are collecting outcome evaluation data.

We included only studies of educational programs rather than clinical treatment. A recent meta-analysis of the effectiveness of couple education programs conducted by the Urban Institute (Reardon-Anderson, Stagner, Macomber, & Murray, 2005) included both educational services and therapeutic treatments.

In addition, we included studies using both control-group designs (both experimental and quasi-experimental) as well as one-group/pre-post designs (with no control group). However, we analyzed these two groups of studies separately because they employ different formulae for calculating an effect size and because control-group designs are thought to be more rigorous tests of program effectiveness. A couple of programs we encountered in our search conducted retrospective pre-post evaluations in which participants, after completing the educational intervention, assessed themselves on certain behaviors and feelings at that point and also retrospectively reported where they thought they were on these same behaviors and feelings before the intervention. Evaluation researchers differ on how valid retrospective pre-post evaluations are, with some arguing that they overestimate the effects of behavioral change and should be limited to self-assessment of learning and subjective sense of change (Hill & Betz, 2005), but others argue that retrospective pre-post evaluation studies are more accurate estimates of change when program participants tend to overestimate their skills before learning more about them (Pratt, McGuigan, & Katzev, 2000). However, with only two such studies, we decided not to include these retrospective pre-post studies for analysis at this time. As more of these studies become available, it would be valuable to assess them separately to see if they provide a similar or different picture of the effectiveness of couple education programs.

A few initiatives are targeting youth with healthy relationship education classes and are collecting outcome data. For instance, the Alabama Community Healthy Marriage Initiative over the past 2 years served more than 2,000 mostly lower-income youth with a marriage and relationship curriculum. These youth showed significant, positive changes in conflict management skills, marital role salience and attitudes, ability to resist peer pressure, and other valuable outcomes (Adler-Baeder, 2009b). However, our focus in this report is on adults rather than youth. Youth programs target quite different outcomes than adult programs and the number of these programs is limited at this time.

We identified more than 200 outcome evaluation studies of couple education programs, but few focused on lower-income couples or individuals. We identified six published or in press articles and six unpublished reports, including working manuscripts, administrative reports, and even preliminary

analyses that were not yet written into an official report. A few demonstration programs that we contacted were collecting outcome data but were not yet in a position to share their results. Table 1 provides a brief overview of the 12 studies that were included in our meta-analysis. Note that three studies reported evaluations of two independent studies, so the total number of studies in our meta-analysis is 15.

There are a few points worth emphasizing from Table 1. First, these evaluation studies of lower-income participants used much larger samples—on average, 365 individuals—compared with research with middle-class samples. No doubt the federal and state funding that supported these programs contributed to the larger sample sizes. Five of the studies came from programs supported by the Office of Family Assistance, Administration for Children and Families, through funding authorized by the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005. Most of the curricula used in these studies were well researched with middle-class couples but specifically adapted to the needs, circumstances, and learning styles of lower-income couples. Some programs were integrated into existing institutional infrastructures (e.g., community human service agencies, U.S. Army Chaplain's Office), while others were freestanding but coordinated through a state-wide healthy marriage initiative.

Coding Procedure

The authors of this study independently coded each study and then compared codes. When there were discrepancies, we consulted the study reports for further clarification until a coding consensus was reached. We coded outcome data that were commonly measured in these reports. The most commonly assessed measures were relationship quality/satisfaction and communication and problem-solving skills. Some other important outcomes were assessed in a few studies, including relationship readiness, relationship commitment/dedication, relationship aggression/violence, and co-parenting quality/cooperation. If at least three reports included assessments of an important outcome, we coded them as well, but only commitment/dedication had enough reports for us to include this outcome in our analyses.

Note that all outcomes were self-reports; we found no observational assessments in this body of work with low-income couples. Previous research (Blanchard et al., 2009) found that observational measures of communication skills in couple education program studies yield significantly larger effect sizes compared with self-report measures, although it is not clear what this difference means. But it is possible that the effect sizes in this study may underestimate the effects of the programs because they were all self-reports.

Most reports provided post-assessments immediately or shortly after the end of the educational intervention. And while many of these reports noted that follow-up assessments were in process, longer-term follow-up outcome data usually were not yet available. Three studies (Antle et al.,

TABLE 1 Overview of Low-Income Couple Education Program Evaluation Studies Included in the Meta-Analysis

Author(s)/Year (*peer-reviewed publication)	Organization	Program(s)	Target	Location	No. of Research Participants	Study Design	Funding Source
Adler-Baeder (2009a)*	Alabama Healthy Marriage Initiative	RE-Mastering the Mysteries of Love; Smart Steps; Basic Training for Black Couples; Together We Can	Low-income couples and individuals	Alabama	568	Pre-post	ACF-OFA
Anle et al. (2009)* Cowan et al. (2009)*	University of Louisville University of California—Berkeley	PREP-Within My Reach Supporting Father Involvement	Low-income individuals Low-income couples	Louisville, Kentucky California	156 192	Pre-post Randomized control-group	Unreported State (CA) Dept. of Social Services
Cox and Shirer (2009)*	Oklahoma State University	Caring for My Family	Low-income couples and individuals	Michigan	85	Nonrandomized control group	State (MD) Dept. of Human Services
Einhorn et al. (2008)* Dyer et al. (2009)*	University of Denver Active Relationships, Inc. PAIRS	PREP-Inside and Out Active Relationships	Prison inmates Low-income Hispanic couples	Oklahoma Dallas, Texas	254 194	Pre-post Pre-post	State (OK) Federal ACF-OFA
Falciglia and Eisenberg (2009)	Utah State U.	PAIRS Essentials Smart Steps	Low-income couples and individuals	Dade Co. Florida	176	Pre-post	Federal ACF-OFA
Higginbotham and Adler-Baeder (2008)*	Utah State U.	Smart Steps	Low-income remarried couples	Northern Utah	792	Pre-post	Federal ACF-OFA
Norbut (2009)	CA Healthy Marriage Coalition	RE-Mastering the Mysteries of Love; 10 Great Dates	Low-income couples	California	128	Pre-post	Federal ACF-OFA
Stanley et al. (2005)*	University of Denver	PREP-Strong and Ready Families	Army couples	Unspecified	670		Federal U.S. Army Chief of Chaplains
Stanley (2009)	University of Denver	PREP-Strong Bonds	Army couples	Ft. Campbell, Kentucky	447	Randomized control-group	Federal NICHD
VanderWal and Manning (2008)*	Healthy Marriages, Healthy Relationships Grand Rapids	Family Wellness; How to Avoid Marrying a Jerk	Low-income couples	Grand Rapids, Michigan	714	Pre-post	Federal ACF

in press*; Cowan et al., 2009*; Stanley et al., 2009*) reported longer-term follow-up outcome data (from 6 to 12 months); we coded these effects, as well.

When coding one-group/pre-post studies, correlations between pre-assessment and post-assessment scores are needed to calculate precise effects. These correlations were available in some studies but not in others. When these correlations were not available, we estimated them to be 0.50, which has proved to be a good estimate that does not bias the overall effect size (Nowak & Heinrichs, 2008; Schwartz, Bode, Repucci, Becker, Sprangers, & Fayers, 2006).

Effect Size Computation

While the methodological gold standard for evaluation research is randomized control trials, one-group/pre-post designs may be reasonable estimates of potential program effects. To date, most HMI programs that have collected outcome data on lower-income couples have used one-group/pre-post designs without comparison groups, a design that is common to naturalistic field studies. A recent meta-analytic study of the effectiveness of couple education programs for middle-class adults found relatively similar patterns of outcomes for control-group and one-group/pre-post design studies (Blanchard et al., 2009). Nevertheless, we conducted separate analyses for studies using experimental and nonexperimental designs, as recommended by meta-analysis experts (Lipsey & Wilson, 2001). We calculated overall standardized mean difference effect sizes for control-group-design studies and standardized mean gain score effect sizes for the one-group/pre-post-design studies. We used Biostat's Comprehensive Meta Analysis II to perform calculations. All effect sizes were weighted by the inverse variance (squared standard error) and averaged to create the overall effect size. We used random effects estimates that allow for the possibility that differences in effect sizes from study to study are associated not only with participant-level sampling error but also with variations in study and intervention methods (Lipsey & Wilson, 2001). We aggregated effect sizes to the study level because most studies included multiple outcomes.

FINDINGS

Control-Group Studies

We first report on the three program evaluation studies with predominantly lower-income participants that used control-group comparisons. Two of these studies used random assignment to groups, and the third study assigned volunteers to treatment and control groups based on their ability to attend a 6-week program (quasi-experimental). For these studies, the overall program effect, comprising self-reports of relationship quality, commitment,

stability, and communication skills, was $d = .250$ ($p < .05$). The range of effect sizes was quite small, from $d = .189$ to $.252$. An effect size of $.250$ is generally considered a small-to-moderate effect (Lipsey & Wilson, 2001) and can be interpreted to mean that about 60% of the treatment-group participants were above the overall median score. (By definition, 50% of control-group participants are above the overall median score.)

One-Group/Pre-Post Studies

Twelve of the 15 program evaluation studies with predominantly lower-income participants used a one-group/pre-post design, comparing a treatment group after the program intervention to that same treatment group before the program began. For these studies, the overall program effect size, comprising self-reports of relationship quality, commitment, and communication skills, was $d = .293$ ($p < .001$), a figure similar to the effect size for the control-group studies. The range of effects sizes went from $d = .126$ to $.655$. An effect size of $.293$ can be interpreted to mean that about 62% of the participants after the program treatment were above the overall median score of the same participants before the program treatment. We further broke down this effect size into separate outcomes for relationship quality/commitment ($d = .287$, $p < .001$, $k = 10$) and communication skills ($d = .409$, $p < .001$, $k = 7$). The effect size for communication skills can be interpreted to mean that 66% of the participants after the program treatment were above the overall median score of the same participants before the program treatment.

Program Dosage

Because of the relatively small number of studies in this meta-analysis, it was difficult to explore program moderators of these effect sizes. However, we did compare lower-dosage (≤ 12 hours program time) to higher-dosage programs (> 12 hours program time). Although the differences were in the expected direction favoring higher-dosage programs, the differences proved non-significant, perhaps due to the small number of studies for comparison. (For control-group studies: $d_{lo} = .252$, ns , $k = 1$; $d_{hi} = .334$, ns , $k = 2$; $Q = 0.07$, ns . For one-group/pre-post studies: $d_{lo} = .262$, $p < .001$, $k = 6$; $d_{hi} = .344$, $p < .001$, $k = 6$; $Q = 1.14$, ns .)

DISCUSSION

Our systematic review of 15 couple education program evaluation studies (from 12 reports) with predominantly lower-income participants suggests that these programs can produce small-to-moderate, reliable improvements in relationship quality and communication skills. The effects are only slightly

smaller than those found in couple education studies with middle-income participants, which generally ranged between .30 and .40 (Hawkins et al., 2008). Most of the studies did not use a control group, but the overall effect size for these one-group/pre-post programs was similar to the overall effect size for the three studies with control-group comparisons.

In interpreting the significance of these results, we should bear in mind that these low-income couples undoubtedly were facing numerous life challenges and hardships that could work against relationship improvement. Moreover, with only two exceptions, the intervention dosage was less than 17 hours of program time usually over a period of 4 to 8 weeks. And many participants did not receive quite the full dose. Given the stressful lives of the participants and the modest educational dosage, the improvements demonstrated are still noteworthy, we believe. And recall that all outcomes were self-report measures that may underestimate true effect sizes (Blanchard et al., 2009). The effect sizes found in this meta-analysis are similar to effects found for other family support educational interventions, such as for adolescent pregnancy prevention programs ($d = .33$) or alcohol and drug abuse prevention programs ($d = .30$) (see Lipsey & Wilson, 1993, Table 1).

STUDY LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE EVALUATION RESEARCH NEEDS

This meta-analysis provides an early look at the emerging research that is evaluating the effectiveness of couple education programs targeted primarily to lower-income couples. However, we were able to review and code only 15 studies (from 12 reports). Clearly, more research in this area is needed. Fortunately, more is in the pipeline and will come out over the next few years, including some randomized control studies with large samples.

Most of the studies in this meta-analysis reported an immediate post-program treatment effect. Only three studies used a later follow-up assessment (although many of these programs are currently collecting longer-term follow-up data). Thus, we cannot yet assert the staying power of these effects for lower-income couples who experience more challenges to their relationships than do middle-income couples. However, meta-analytic research with middle-income couples found little evidence of deterioration of program effects (Hawkins et al., 2008). Future research will establish whether positive program effects are maintained over time for lower-income couples.

Our scan of studies revealed only a few programs that targeted lower-income singles not currently in serious romantic relationships to help them improve healthy relationship knowledge, readiness, and decision making. Thus, we were not able to assess the effectiveness of these kinds of important programs yet. We look forward to more evaluation research in this area.

Finally, only a few of the studies we reviewed assessed important outcomes such as relationship violence, co-parenting behavior, and, ultimately, child outcomes. Monitoring these outcomes will be crucial as more evaluation studies are completed. Again, we are encouraged that evaluation studies in the pipeline will include some of these important outcomes.

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