

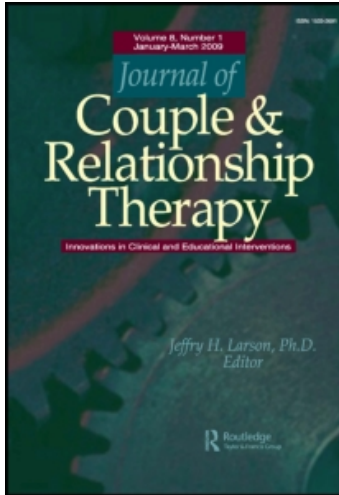
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Relationship Education with Both Married and Unmarried Stepouples: An Exploratory Study

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This study highlights the experience of 356 adults who attended a 12-hour stepfamily relationship education course. Referred to as “stepcouples,” these adult participants were either remarried, cohabitating, or seriously dating someone who had children from a previous relationship. Self-report measures of relationship quality were gathered before the course began, at the end of the 6-week course, and 1 month later. Results from repeated measures analysis of variance suggest that stepcouples, regardless of their race or marital status, report that they benefit from stepfamily relationship education. For both white and Latino participants, reports of commitment increased and agreement on finances, ex-partners, and parenting all improved over time. Responses from semistructured interviews are included to illustrate participants’ perspectives. The similarity in outcomes, as well as the qualitative responses, point to research and practice implications regarding whether stepfamily education should be, or needs to be, different for married and unmarried stepcouples.

KEYWORDS *family life education, marriage, relationship education, remarriage, stepfamily*

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Although the extant literature indicates people across economic and cultural spectra desire to have healthy relationships, there continues to be underserved populations for which there is limited research and best practices for couple and relationship education (CRE) programming. As evidence of their concern about this gap in knowledge, the Administration for Children and Families identified low-income couples, ethnic- and racial-minority groups, and stepfamilies as populations they would like included in Healthy Marriage Initiative (2005) activities and evaluations. This study looks at the results of a federally-sponsored program that provided CRE to low-income, white and Latino couples in stepfamilies (stepcouples).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Recent U.S. Census figures indicate that 12 million children (17% of all children under age 18) live in a blended family. A household is designated as "blended" if there is a stepparent, stepsibling, or half-sibling present (Kreider, 2008). In the 2002 National Survey of America's Families, 3% of all children were living in cohabitating stepfamilies (Acs & Nelson, 2003). Outcomes for children living in stepfamily households are typically between those in single- and married-parent families (Acs & Nelson, 2003; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). However, the magnitude of the variation depends, in part, on the marital status of the adults. For example, children living with cohabiting stepparents generally experience more material hardship than do children living with married parents (either married biological/adoptive parents or married stepparents) (Acs & Nelson, 2003). Between 26% and 36% of children living in an unmarried stepfamily household are below the poverty level compared with only 10% of children living with married biological parents (Kreider, 2008).

All relationships inevitably encounter stressors that impact both personal and interpersonal functioning. Low-income stepcouples, however, are confronted with stressors common to all families (e.g., time, intimacy, money) in addition to several unique issues, such as navigating a stepparent role, adjusting to the involvement (or lack thereof) of nonresidential ex-partners, and dealing with financial arrangements between two households (Robertson, Adler-Baeder, Collins, DeMarco, Fein, & Schramm, 2006; Teachman, 2008). The time, energy, and resources spent on stepfamily issues can distract couples from attending to the enhancement of their own relationships and can, unintentionally, lead to increased conflict (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Schultz, Schultz, & Olson, 1991).

Consequently, leading experts have noted that best practices in CRE should involve an appreciation of the challenges facing both low-income populations and the developmental differences between couples in first marriages and those who are remarried and/or have children from previous

relationships (e.g., Halford, Markman, Kline, & Stanley, 2003; Hawkins, Carroll, Doherty, & Willoughby, 2004). Scholars and practitioners have begun recommending tailored approaches to reach and teach families who are low-income, who are ethnically diverse, or who have children from previous relationships (i.e., Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Ooms & Wilson, 2004). For example, because most couples who remarry also form stepfamilies, it has been recommended that remarriage education “should address factors that are unique to stepfamilies, as well as factors that are common to all couples” (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, p. 448).

Historically, there have been few programs, and even fewer research studies, that focus on how CRE can assist unmarried stepfamilies (cf., Whitton, Nicholson, & Markman, 2008). Perhaps there has been an assumption that cohabitating families do not intend to marry or that cohabitation is a substitute for remarriage. However, particularly in the context of stepfamilies, cohabitation should not be considered an indicator that marriage cannot, or will not, occur. To the contrary, it is estimated that two-thirds of mothers and children enter a stepfamily relationship via cohabitation, which is a precursor to roughly three-quarters of remarriages (Bumpass, Raley, & Sweet, 1995; Montgomery, Anderson, Hetherington, & Clingempeel, 1992).

Yet, regardless of whether cohabitation results in marriage, the potential of healthier and more stable home environments for children, who have already experienced at least one major relationship transition, is a guiding justification to provide CRE interventions for these families (Higginbotham, n.d.; see also www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/). The evidence from meta-analyses suggests CRE is beneficial to participants (Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2008), and reviews of the extant stepfamily interventions highlight improvements in family communication and conflict management (Whitton et al., 2008). Recent research continues to corroborate earlier findings and suggests stepfamily CRE is associated with benefits for children as well as enhanced adult relationship skills, commitment, and relationship stability (Higginbotham & Adler-Baeder, 2008; Higginbotham, Skogrand, & Torres, 2010). The available literature has already led to the development of best practice recommendations for low-income married stepcouples (see Robertson et al., 2006). However, to date there is little known about the experience or efficacy of CRE for unmarried stepcouples. This study seeks to address this gap.

Two of the currently federally funded, healthy marriage demonstration projects target low-income, ethnically diverse stepfamilies (Higginbotham, n.d.). Both grants use Smart Steps, a 12-hour research-based CRE curriculum that specifically addresses topics faced by stepfamilies (Adler-Baeder, 2007). Several articles have already stemmed from these projects based on preliminary findings from the first cohort of participants (e.g., Higginbotham & Adler-Baeder, 2008; Higginbotham et al., 2010; Skogrand, Reck, Higginbotham, Adler-Baeder, & Dansie, 2010). The present study draws on

data from six cohorts, over a 3-year period, to explore the experience of unmarried participants. Their outcomes are compared, by ethnicity and gender, with those for married participants who attended the same course.

METHOD

Participants

Between January 2007 and December 2009, over 1500 adults participated in Smart Steps courses offered via Head Start and community family service agencies throughout Utah. Courses and evaluation materials were offered in English and Spanish. Following an approved human subjects protocol, participants were asked to respond to various questions about their couple relationship prior to beginning the course (T1), at the end of the 6-week course (T2), and one month later at the end of an optional booster session (T3).

Approximately 75% of participants “completed” the course, which was defined by the government as attending 9 of the 12 hours. Approximately, one third of participants returned 4 to 6 weeks after the course concluded for an optional booster session. Due to the researchers’ interest in outcomes over time and the corresponding statistical analyses, only participants who completed T1, T2, and T3 surveys were included in the present study ($n = 356$). Chi-square statistics were calculated comparing those who completed only the T1 survey, those who completed T1 and T2, and those who completed all three surveys. No statistical differences were found in regard to age, income, or education.

Of the 356 participants used in this sample, 124 adults (34.8%) indicated they were in an unmarried committed relationship. Although not all these individuals were able to attend with their partner, 51 couples (102 adults) in unmarried committed relationships did come together. Men in the unmarried sample had a mean age of 32.6 years and 11.9 years of education, and 61.7% made less than \$30,000 annually. Only 6.4% of the unmarried men made more than \$50,000 annually. The women in the unmarried sample were, on average, 30.3 years old and had 12 years of education. Ninety-two percent made less than \$30,000 annually and only 1.5% made more than \$50,000 annually. Approximately 80% of unmarried male and female participants reported cohabitating with their current partner. The average length of their cohabitation was 25 months. Fifty-three percent of the unmarried female participants were white and another 46.7% reported being Hispanic/Latino. Similarly, 55.1% of men were white (55.1%) and 44.9% were Hispanic/Latino.

The remaining 232 adults (65.2% percent) indicated they were in a married relationship. Of these married couples, 92 attend the course with their spouse (184 adults). Men in the married sample had a mean age of 34.1 years and 12.9 years of education. Fifty-seven percent of married men

made less than \$30,000 annually whereas 12.7% made more than \$50,000 annually. For married women, the average was 32.7 years old and 12.8 years of education. Ninety-one percent of these women made less than \$30,000 annually.

Compared to the unmarried sample, the married participants were slightly older ($t = 2.76, p = .006$) and had more education ($t = 3.02, p = .003$). However, the practical significance of these differences is questionable inasmuch as the mean age was still within two years of each other and education was less than a 1-year difference. There was a higher proportion of Latinos in the unmarried sample ($\chi^2 = 11.56, df = 1, p = .001$). The two samples did not differ, at T1, on any of the outcomes measured (see later) with the exception of a small, albeit significant, difference on commitment ($t = 2.30, p = .022$). Married participants had a baseline mean of 4.38 ($SD = .694$); unmarries, 4.21 ($SD = .677$).

Measures

Outcomes reported in this study include a four-item scale of commitment developed by Stanley, Markman, and Whitton (2002). On a five-point Likert-scale, ranging from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree," participants rated the following statements: (a) My relationship with my partner/spouse is more important to me than almost anything else in my life; (b) I may not want to be with my partner/spouse a few years from now; (c) I like to think of my partner/spouse and me more in terms of "us" and "we" than "me" and "him/her"; and (d) I want this relationship to stay strong no matter what rough times we may encounter. An average total score was then computed. Alpha values for men and women at each of the three time periods centered around .70. Relationship instability was assessed by summing responses to a four-item scale developed by Booth, Johnson, and Edwards (1983). On a five-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree," participants rated the following questions: (a) Have you ever thought your relationship might be in trouble? (b) Has the thought of getting a divorce or separation crossed your mind? (c) Have you discussed divorce or separation with a close friend? (d) Have you or your partner/spouse ever seriously suggested the idea of divorce or separation? The alpha values for men and women were consistently around .88.

The project evaluators also created three single-item measures that assessed the degree to which participants agreed with their partner on major relational issues covered in the curriculum: handling finances, dealing with ex-spouses/partners, and parenting (1 = "Always disagree" to 5 = "Always agree"). The correlations between the outcome variables were all less than .50, suggesting independence and justifying separate analyses.

Post Program Interviews

Thirteen unmarried couples (26 participants) were interviewed separately at the end of the course (T2). Ten of the couples were living together, and the remaining three couples were in a committed relationship but were not cohabiting. These semistructured interviews provided participants an opportunity to provide in-depth feedback about the course and to discuss their experience, in detail. Specific questions related to this study included: "Please tell me about good things that have happened in your couple relationship or in your family, which resulted from taking this course" and "Are there things you plan to do differently in your couples relationship or family life now that you have taken the course?"

There was no formal analysis of the post program interviews that would coincide with the outcome variables because the variables of commitment, relationship instability, and agreement on finances, ex-partners, and parenting did not guide the development of the interview questions. The evaluators, therefore, did not look for, nor did they expect to find, these themes in the qualitative responses. To varying degrees, however, participants volunteered descriptions about how the course impacted each of these areas. They did not necessarily use the same terminology as the outcome variables, but the meaning was similar and examples of participant comments related to the outcome variables are included in the results section. The participants' comments are used to enhance quantitative findings as described by Ragin:

The key features common to all qualitative methods can be seen when they are contrasted with quantitative methods. Most quantitative data techniques are data condensers. They condense data in order to see the big picture. Qualitative methods, by contrast, are best understood as data enhancers. When data are enhanced, it is possible to see key aspects of cases more clearly (Ragin, 1994, p. 92).

Names of participants have been changed for anonymity.

RESULTS

Because approximately two-thirds of the sample attended the course as a couple, quantitative analyses were run separately for men and women to avoid violations of sample independence. In Table 1, means, standard deviations, and subsample sizes are presented by gender, ethnicity, and marital status at each time point. Results from repeated-measures ANOVAs, with ethnicity (white/Latino) and relationship status (married/unmarried but in a committed relationship) as between-subject factors, suggest stepfamily CRE has comparable effects for all participants (Table 2). Statistical findings are

TABLE 1 Sample Size, Means, and Standard Deviations at Pre, Post, and Booster Session

Variables	Men						Women																	
	White			Latino			White			Latino														
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	N	M	SD												
Commitment																								
Pre	73	4.52	0.62	28	4.38	0.81	25	3.99	0.87	22	4.10	0.68	94	4.52	0.61	40	4.49	0.55	40	4.05	0.73	35	3.71	0.66
Post	73	4.60	0.60	28	4.59	0.43	25	4.28	0.78	22	4.28	0.62	94	4.48	0.60	40	4.54	0.50	40	4.34	0.68	35	4.13	0.73
Booster	73	4.60	0.52	28	4.52	0.48	25	4.53	0.47	22	4.25	0.47	94	4.45	0.72	40	4.49	0.66	40	4.35	0.70	35	4.11	0.82
Instability																								
Pre	75	6.87	2.68	27	6.33	1.82	27	6.26	2.03	22	6.96	2.17	93	7.14	2.87	41	6.22	2.25	41	7.24	2.02	36	7.86	2.64
Post	75	6.83	2.51	27	6.15	1.73	27	5.85	1.73	22	6.68	2.08	93	7.13	2.63	41	6.22	1.92	41	6.81	2.05	36	7.44	2.12
Booster	75	6.75	2.69	27	6.59	2.36	27	5.89	1.65	22	6.77	2.05	93	6.65	2.69	41	6.68	3.07	41	6.88	1.95	36	7.06	2.15
Finances																								
Pre	74	3.36	1.05	28	3.64	0.95	27	3.44	1.42	26	3.42	1.10	96	3.39	1.07	40	3.68	0.80	41	3.29	1.31	40	3.20	1.24
Post	74	3.53	0.97	28	3.75	0.75	27	3.52	1.25	26	4.00	0.90	96	3.42	0.91	40	3.53	0.78	41	3.66	1.20	40	3.30	1.27
Booster	74	3.68	0.98	28	3.96	0.64	27	3.67	1.04	26	3.69	1.01	96	3.56	0.93	40	3.78	1.00	41	3.80	1.03	40	3.70	1.20
Ex-spouse																								
Pre	73	3.16	1.16	29	3.10	1.26	21	2.86	1.62	24	2.54	1.29	92	3.45	1.03	40	3.42	0.96	37	2.86	1.25	34	2.88	1.27
Post	73	3.37	1.05	29	3.21	1.11	21	2.76	1.51	24	3.42	1.32	92	3.40	1.03	40	3.33	0.80	37	3.14	1.29	34	3.03	1.29
Booster	73	3.49	1.09	29	3.90	0.98	21	3.29	1.31	24	3.29	1.16	92	3.50	0.94	40	3.67	1.05	37	3.49	1.15	34	3.24	1.35
Parenting																								
Pre	78	3.14	0.89	29	3.66	1.05	27	3.41	1.19	26	3.19	1.06	95	3.15	1.05	41	3.34	0.91	39	3.18	1.17	37	3.24	1.19
Post	78	3.49	0.92	29	3.76	0.64	27	3.85	1.17	26	3.88	1.28	95	3.25	0.88	41	3.54	0.81	39	3.85	0.93	37	3.38	1.30
Booster	78	3.50	0.98	29	4.07	0.53	27	3.81	1.15	26	3.77	1.03	95	3.38	0.91	41	3.98	0.72	39	4.00	1.03	37	3.76	0.90

TABLE 2 Summary of Repeated-Measures ANOVAs

	<i>F</i> (<i>df</i>)	<i>p</i>	Partial η^2
Commitment			
Men	7.18 (2,144)	0.001	0.091
Women	9.33 (2,205)	0.000	0.083
Relationship instability			
Men	0.76 (2,145)	0.472	0.010
Women	1.59 (2,202)	0.206	0.016
Agreement: Finances			
Men	5.16 (2,148)	0.007	0.065
Women	8.99 (2,208)	0.000	0.080
Agreement: Ex-spouse			
Men	9.08 (2,140)	0.000	0.115
Women	5.09 (2,193)	0.007	0.050
Agreement: Parenting			
Men	14.79 (2,154)	0.000	0.161
Women	24.93 (2,208)	0.000	0.193

summarized next, and quotes from the qualitative interviews are included to illustrate how participants thought about these aspects of their relationship.

Commitment

Overall, commitment scores increased significantly for both men [$F(2,144) = 7.18$, $p = .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .091$] and women [$F(2,205) = 9.33$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .083$]. Ethnicity had significant main effects for both men [$F(1,145) = 11.11$, $p = .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .071$] and women [$F(1,206) = 17.50$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .086$]. This is largely explained by Latino participants, male and female, starting the program with lower levels of commitment. However, by T3 the differences were minimal. This trend is captured in the time \times ethnicity interaction statistics for men and [$F(2,144) = 3.05$, $p = .051$, partial $\eta^2 = .041$] and women [$F(2,205) = 9.96$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .089$]. There were no differences by marital status.

Participants who were interviewed did not specifically use the word commitment in their responses to interview questions. However, embedded in many comments were behaviors or attitudes that indicated commitment to the relationship. A Latino couple, Albert and Sara, were dating. Sara had two children from a previous marriage. Albert described an enhanced sense of responsibility in anticipation of their marriage:

I'm not going to do what I did when I was single. Now I have a responsibility and I have another person in my responsibility. I'm not going to be able to do certain things, but I have to think more about her and move my wants to the side a little.

Relationship Instability

Instability decreased across the three assessments, although declines were not significant. Despite the lack of statistical significance in the quantitative analyses, in the qualitative interviews, participants indicated they perceived the course helping their relationship become more stable and strong. For example, Julie and Martin, a white couple, were dating and planned to marry. Julie had five children from a previous marriage and Martin had been married previously but had no children. Martin said the following after completing the course:

I'm . . . taking these classes and getting a stable foundation between us before we get married—and I'm planning on marrying her. I just want to do this [marriage] different than my first one because my first one didn't work out because of some issues. So I want to be prepared.

Roberto and Maria, a Latino couple, were living together. She had two children and he had none. Before taking the stepfamily course, they both agreed that there were relational challenges between Roberto and her children. In fact, it was to the point where Maria was afraid that they would not be able to maintain their relationship:

Just a little more and the relationship was going to break. And thanks to these classes we have now united ourselves. His personality is very strong and attending the class made him understand that, in that way, in the way he acted, things weren't going to get resolved. Yes, on my part I don't argue so much with him . . . and now everything is very different, we try to talk about things and not end up in a fight.

Roberto agreed that the stepfamily course had helped stabilize their relationship. He said, "Well, now that there are less problems and we get along better . . . now there is more communication and everything."

Agreement: Finances

Agreement on finances improved significantly for men [$F(2,148) = 5.16$, $p = .007$, partial $\eta^2 = .065$] and women [$F(2,208) = 8.99$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .080$], with no main effects for ethnicity or marital status. However, there was a significant time x ethnicity interaction for women [$F(2,208) = 3.43$, $p = .034$, partial $\eta^2 = .032$]; Latino women started off lower than white women at T1 but were higher at T2 and T3 assessments.

Anita and Ron, a white couple, had been dating for 4 years and planned to marry. They enrolled in the stepfamily course because they were concerned about how Anita's twin daughters, age 12, and Ron's daughter, age

14, would adjust to living together. When asked if she planned to do anything differently after taking the course, Anita said:

We've learned a lot. I can't even remember it all, but the money part really helped us because we didn't know what we were going to do. And, you know, people can fight about money—holy cow, they can fight about money! So, yeah, a lot of good things have happened. . . .

Agreement: Ex-Partner

Men [$F(2,140) = 9.08, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .115$] and women [$F(2,193) = 5.09, p = .007$, partial $\eta^2 = .050$] reported increased agreement on how to deal with ex-partners. Ethnicity had a significant main effect for both men [$F(1,141) = 4.49, p = .036$, partial $\eta^2 = .031$] and women [$F(1,194) = 8.73, p = .004$, partial $\eta^2 = .043$], with married and unmarried whites reporting greater agreement at each of the three time points.

It was relatively rare for participants to talk about ex-partners when interviewed. The interviews clarified why. For several participants, ex-partners were not even in the picture, or there was no disagreement as a couple about how to deal with ex-partners. For example, a white woman said, "My ex-husband isn't really involved, so this class wasn't so much for me to be able to communicate with the ex." Allen and Connie were a white couple who were living together and who did have ongoing interaction with an ex-partner. Connie and Allen had two children each. Allen described how his approach to Connie's ex-partner had changed out of respect for Connie's son.

I've learned also that I don't talk about [her ex] in any sort of way that would be rude or putting him down, belittling him in front of his kid because [her son] might take it personal as he is a part of him.

Agreement: Parenting

Both men [$F(2,154) = 14.79, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .161$] and women [$F(2,205) = 27.10, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .209$] reported improvements in the area of agreement on parenting with no statistical differences by race or marital status. Several participants talked about parenting and how they were implementing practices they learned in the course. They would often say things like, "We're trying things we learned in class." One participant reported, "[We learned] better discipline ideas, following through with discipline, more structure, better communication." A white couple, Lisa and Tim, had disagreed about how to discipline Lisa's two children ever since they moved in together.

Lisa shared her concern about Tim's way of disciplining before attending the course:

I felt he was a little too tough on the kids or I felt he was too overbearing on his opinions or how he thought the house should run. . . . You're walking into our family. This is what I had done and to change everything all of the sudden is too much for all of us, for me and the kids.

Tim said, "I possibly wasn't aware I didn't have enough patience or self-control."

As a result of attending the stepfamily course, Tim and Lisa enhanced their couple communication and developed a shared understanding of discipline:

Tim: Just having more self-control and more patience with the children is what I have learned from this program and how to cope, to be better and stronger and strengthen our relationships together in the family.

Lisa: We have communicated a lot better. I think we got a lot of questions answered. . . . We know what we expect from the kids and I think the kids are less confused. They know what we expect so it's a lot easier. The kids have been amazing. They've totally changed. So it's been good.

DISCUSSION

Robertson and colleagues (2006) have provided CRE recommendations for low-income, married stepcouples; however, this is the first known study to focus on low-income, unmarried stepcouples who attended a stepfamily course. Quantitative data were collected before and at the end of the 6-week course, and one month later. In addition, qualitative data were collected about the couples' experiences in taking the course. These quantitative and qualitative findings provide some answers, raise many questions, and allow for speculation about the stepfamily education experience for unmarried participants.

Albeit an exploratory study, the findings suggest stepcouples, regardless of their ethnicity or marital status, may benefit similarly from stepfamily CRE. Participants report that commitment tends to go up and agreement on key relationship issues improves. Statistically, there were no changes on the relationship instability variable; however, multiple participants talked about how the class strengthened their relationship. One participant talked about how she no longer wanted to be with her partner at the beginning of the classes but by the end "everything [was] different." Others identified behaviors they were changing, which could theoretically affect stability. They said things like "now we're going to talk about things more."

Discrepancies between the quantitative data and qualitative interviews raise the question as to whether forced-choice surveys fully capture the results of stepfamily CRE for unmarried stepcouples. Consistent with previous recommendations for research-related best practices, further qualitative research is warranted to truly understand what unmarried stepcouples are dealing with in their lives, what aspects of relationship quality are really important to them, and the benefits they personally perceive from participating in stepfamily education (cf., Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000). It would also be noteworthy to identify if there is a “selection” effect. If in fact stepfamily CRE primarily draws stepcouples who already have a greater commitment or desire to make their relationship work, the research findings may be influenced by ceiling effects and/or a restriction of range (cf., Stanley, 2001).

Implications for Practice

Existing recommendations for practitioners posit that individuals feel most comfortable in family life education with people of similar characteristics (e.g., Lengua et al., 1992). Regarding stepcouples, Adler-Baeder and Higginbotham (2004) suggest: “Although program content can be infused into general marriage education curricula for mixed-group participants, effectiveness will likely be enhanced if couples forming stepfamilies participate in a homogeneous group” (p. 455). Yet, what has not been asked or researched is the degree of homogeneity that is optimal. How homogeneous should participants in a stepfamily education class be? This is a difficult question to answer. For example, there are diverse possible partner combinations that can differentiate remarriage and stepfamily living, and the presence or absence of children that are “yours, mine, and ours” introduces additional variations (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). That said, although speculative, the findings presented herein give some indication that as long as participants are experiencing stepfamily related issues—whether it is through cohabitation, marriage, or serious dating—participants benefit fairly equitably.

The implications of these findings are multifaceted. First, programmatically, it does not appear necessary to target or screen out stepcouples by relationship status. There did not emerge in this study any reason why married and unmarried committed stepcouples should be discouraged or disallowed from taking stepfamily CRE classes jointly. Married participants may consider the educational opportunity as “remarriage enrichment,” while unmarried participants may see it as “marriage preparation” or “relationship education.” Whatever participants call it, if the curriculum focuses on relationship skills in the context of stepfamily life—as is the case with Smart Steps—the material appears to be relevant and helpful to a diverse group of stepcouples.

A second implication, which also needs further empirical validation, is whether joint attendance of married and unmarried stepcouples has an additive benefit. Reports from some unmarried participants in our study suggest

that they value the different perspectives of those who are married and more experienced. One man enjoyed the diversity in his class, which included cohabiting, engaged, and married stepcouples. He described a benefit of the group's composition: "We were in there with stepfamilies who had been stepfamilies for long periods of time . . . and it really helped because a lot of the problems that we were going through they've already experienced, and they would share with us what worked for them and what didn't."

From a social policy perspective, which tends to see marriage as a positive family structure, if fear of marriage, commitment, or relationship failure is a concern for unmarried stepcouples, they may actually benefit from the normalizing and social support that occurs through group discussions with other stepcouples from diverse backgrounds and arrangements. Some unmarried couples may understandably be reticent about remarriage because of the things they see in the media (see Leon & Angst, 2005). However, in a CRE class that includes married participants, unmarried couples can get a nonsensationalized or stereotyped message about the remarriage experience. For example, one Latino woman in our study shared, "Everyone kept telling me, 'But he has kids!' . . . I thought that I was the only case, but now I realize that there are many people who are in our situation. . . . After taking this class, my life changed. It doesn't bother me that he already had kids."

A third related implication deals with the timing of stepfamily education. Because of some negative findings regarding cohabitation outcomes (Smock, 2000; Xu, Hudspeth, & Bartkowski, 2006), practitioners may question efforts that appear to promote this family structure. However, the question practitioners should ask is if the period of cohabitation is the "teachable moment" for stepfamilies. Unmarried stepcouples—especially those who enroll in CRE programs—likely consider cohabitation to be a type of remarriage preparation, and increasingly it appears cohabitation is to remarriage what engagement is for first marriage (Higginbotham, Miller, & Niehuis, 2009; Wineberg & McCarthy, 1998). Around 75% of couples will cohabit before remarriage, and with nearly half of all U.S. marriages being a remarriage for one or both partners there are a lot of people who are raising children in unmarried relationships (Bumpass et al., 1995; Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Montgomery et al., 1992; Teachman, 2008). Just as it is difficult to get non-parents to come to parent education, trying to target pre-cohabitation stepcouples for remarriage or stepfamily education programs may be premature. They may not feel like they need it yet.

Limitations

There are numerous limitations in this exploratory study, as is often the case with conducting evaluations with populations that are difficult to access or follow, such as low-income and ethnic minority groups (Bamberger, Rugh,

Church, & Fort, 2004; Heppner, Wampold, & Kivlighan, 2008). Furthermore, stepfamily education has not been implemented or researched extensively for low-income, Latino populations, and, therefore, it is difficult to know what the culturally appropriate evaluation criteria would be in these initial studies. In an attempt to address this difficulty, qualitative interviews were conducted. However, the contribution of the qualitative data is restricted in that the questions were not aligned with the quantitative data to create a true mixed-methods study. Inherent quantitative limitations, owing to the selected statistical analyses and the evaluation design in general, further temper conclusions that may be drawn from the present study. Specifically, there is the lack of a control group, the inclusion of single-item measurements, and self-report rater bias. Although these limitations are common in exploratory studies, particularly for group interventions in “real-world” settings (see Bamberger et al., 2004), these findings should be viewed as an initial empirical foray into the examination of the CRE experience for diverse stepcouples.

In summary, the results of this study suggest that unmarried stepcouples do not differ from those of married stepcouples in the outcomes measured over the course of a stepfamily CRE program. Whether white or Latino, married or unmarried, improvements were noted on commitment as well as agreement on specific relationship issues. Additional study is needed to explore the degree to which best practices for stepfamily education should be, or even need to be, different for unmarried committed stepcouples. Although policy and empirical evidence of effectiveness generally drive the practice of CRE, additional studies on the perceptions, motivations, and interests of differing types of stepcouples will be essential not just to recruit and retain this large group of potential participants but to determine whether the field is really addressing and meeting their needs with the extant approaches and interventions.

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