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"I Don't Want to Make the Same Mistakes": Relationship Education Among Low-Income Single Adults

Objective: *To examine, through the lens of symbolic interactionism, the experiences and initial outcomes of low-income single adults who received relationship education.*
Background: *As relationship education reaches more low-income participants, research is needed to examine how it reaches such audiences and how it works. We used mixed-methods to examine processes and learning outcomes among these participants.*
Method: *Focus-group interview data (*n = *10) and short-response qualitative data (*n = *188) were analyzed phenomenologically. Quantitative data (*n = *165) were collected to examine changes in participants' perceived knowledge about healthy relationships using a random-intercept, multilevel regression model.*
Results: *The two qualitative analyses yielded four themes, three of which overlapped: participant motivation based on past relationship mistakes, reported and anticipated change, and self-assessment. The quantitative analyses showed a statistically significant increase in perceived knowledge about relationship skills and healthy partner selection. Participants also placed greater importance on a potential partner's past relationship patterns, relationship behaviors, and attitudes.*
Conclusion: *Past relationship experiences motivated participants' learning and moved them toward change. Participants increased their relationship knowledge in terms of selection and pacing.*
Implications: *Relationship education can be offered as an impactful adjunct service to low-income participants.*

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Key Words: family life education, low income, prevention/intervention programs, symbolic interactionism.

Couple relationship education among middle-class participants is generally effective (Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2008), but it is unclear how well relationship education meets the needs of participants with lower incomes (Ooms & Wilson, 2004). Low-income couples certainly benefit from relationship education (Carlson, Barden, Daire, & Greene, 2014; Hawkins & Ooms, 2010), but studies also suggest that financial strain and contextual stressors make the low-income relationship context different (Williamson, Altman, Hsueh, & Bradbury, 2016). Indeed, a low-income context is in itself a risk factor for relationship instability (Sassler, 2010) and dissolution (Cherlin, 2009). Thus, research is needed to establish best practices for working with this relatively high-risk population (Johnson, 2012).

To address this gap, we used a mixed-methods design to examine the experiences and initial

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outcomes of low-income single adults in relationship education, offered as part of a Work Success program. With symbolic interactionism as a theoretical lens (Blumer, 1969; Carter & Fuller, 2016), we used two qualitative methods to phenomenologically examine the experiences of participants in relationship education for individuals: focus group interviews and short response survey data. We also used quantitative survey data to assess normative outcomes. Recent meta-analytic research suggests that the impact of relationship education may be relatively weaker for low-income couples (Hawkins & Erickson, 2015), but relatively little is known about the experiences and processes of low-income participants in education—especially single individuals. Thus, the present study was designed to examine experiences with relationship education among individuals with income levels well below the poverty line.

Relationship Education for Singles

Relationship instability is associated with negative outcome for both adults (Cherlin, 2009) and children (Brown, Manning, & Stykes, 2015). For example, relationship cycling and fast relationship pacing are associated with lower levels of marriage stability and commitment (Vennum & Johnson, 2014), and family instability is linked to lower child well-being (Brown, 2010). In an effort to preempt these outcomes, individually oriented relationship education programs are being used to help single adults even before committed, intimate relationships occur (Cottle, Thompson, Burr, & Hubler, 2014). However, research is needed to examine how relationship education for singles can reach low-income audiences and whether it works.

Relationship education for singles aims to teach participants knowledge regarding healthy choices for future relationships (Antle et al., 2013; Van Epp, Futris, Van Epp, & Campbell, 2008), with a focus on relationship pacing and relationship health. Because there is often no current focal relationship, content typically focuses on learning elements of healthy relationships. Meta-analytic evidence shows that individually oriented relationship education has a positive effect on relationship knowledge, attitudes, and skills: $d = .36$ for control-group studies; $d = .47$ for one-group studies (Simpson, Leonhardt, & Hawkins, 2018). The evidence of positive but limited efficacy for relationship education among single individuals underscores the need to examine processes of relationship education among singles. A few existing education programs for single participants—Within My Reach (Antle et al., 2013) and Love U2: Increasing Your Relationship Smarts (Adler-Baeder, Kerpelman, Schramm, Higginbotham, & Paulk, 2007)—have been shown to be effective (see also Antle et al., 2013), but effectiveness of the Premarital Interpersonal Choices and Knowledge program (PICK; Van Epp, 2011), which is used for the present study, has not been evaluated with low-income participants.

The PICK program is designed to help singles make healthy relationship choices and avoid unhealthy relationships (Van Epp, 2011). It has two main components: FACES and the relationship attachment model (RAM). FACES refers to knowledge about the importance of (a) Family dynamics and childhood experiences, (b) Attitudes and actions of the conscience, (c) Compatibility potential, (d) Examples of other relationships, and (e) Skills before entering into a serious relationship (Van Epp, 2011). The premise of the RAM is that healthy relationship pacing balances five relationship components: know, trust, rely, commit, and touch (Van Epp, 2011).

Evaluations of PICK have shown that the program holds promise for achieving its purpose. In one study, single U.S. Army soldiers reported increased understanding of relationship skills and healthy relationship pacing, and more realistic attitudes and beliefs about mate selection and marriage (Van Epp et al., 2008). Another study of adolescents found statistically significant positive increases in relationship knowledge (Brower et al., 2012). Yet another study found that, relative to a comparison group, the treatment group of adult PICK participants from a community sample reported higher rates of relationship knowledge and knowledge about partner selection (Bradford, Stewart, Higginbotham, & Pfister, 2016). However, outcomes in past studies have varied by participant demographic factors; for example, in one study, older participants learned relatively less than younger participants (Antle et al., 2013), and in another, women gained relatively more knowledge than men (Bradford et al., 2016). Therefore, in the present study, we tested covariates such as gender, education, and socioeconomic status.

Low-Income Participants

A common critique has been that relationship education typically reaches middle-class, nondistressed couples and that disadvantaged populations are, at best, underserved (Ooms & Wilson, 2004). To the extent that relationship education is effective, however, the needs of low-income individuals may be relatively more acute. The context of poverty is associated with risk factors for couples, including financial strain, marital and parent–child conflict, complicated family histories, family instability, and substance use (Cherlin, 2009; Lichter & Carmalt, 2009; Sassler, 2010; Trail & Karney, 2012). For example, divorce is nearly twice as common for women who live in low-income neighborhoods compared with those in high-income neighborhoods (Raley & Bumpass, 2003), and low income is a common reason for delaying or forgoing marriage (Sassler, 2010). Conversely, low-income couples have been found to have high levels of marital quality, with protective factors such as shared religious beliefs (Lichter & Carmalt, 2009). Moreover, a study of more than 6,000 stratified, randomized U.S. participants found that low-income individuals tend to have traditional values and romantic views of marriage and have skills-based relationship problems similar to those of more affluent individuals (Trail & Karney, 2012). In addition, research has shown that individuals with low incomes are no less interested in relationship education than those at other income levels (Dion et al., 2008). These findings suggest that "helping low-income persons gain access to relationship and marriage education may be an equal opportunity issue" (Ooms & Wilson, 2004, p. 440). Relevant to the present study, the poverty rate in the United States is higher for women in general (16.3% vs. 13.8% for men), and much higher for single female-headed families (26.6% vs. 5.1% for two-parent families; U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Also, women's valuation of relationships and marriage predicts participation in relationship education (Duncan, Holman, & Yang, 2007), and women are more active in seeking intervention than men (Doss, Atkins, & Christensen, 2003).

To disseminate relationship education more broadly, scholars have advocated offering programming as part of extant services such as schools, faith communities, family and community action agencies, and so forth (Futris, 2007). In addition, interventionists have made inroads in offering relationship education to low-income participants (Hawkins & Erickson, 2015). In the present study, we examine the feasibility of doing both by offering relationship education via an unemployment services program called Work Success. Offering education in such a setting seems logical due to the linkages between low income and relationship instability (Cherlin, 2009; Sassler, 2010). A challenge in this setting was that program dosage varied: Participants left the program once employed. Thus, some participants completed all three sessions, but others completed only one or two, so we examined dosage as covariate. This real-world factor aside, the program allowed an opportunity to examine the effectiveness of relationship education offered alongside other services to low-income participants.

Conceptual Framework and Study Design

Symbolic Interactionism

To gain insights into participant experiences, we used symbolic interactionism, with the view that knowledge and meaning are constructed. A symbolic interactionist view is also consistent with phenomenology: Both give attention to how individuals interpret their subjective worlds (Carter & Fuller, 2016). In symbolic interactionism, it is theorized that people act depending on the subjective meanings that symbols (i.e., things, words) hold for them (Mead, 1934). Meaning arises in an ongoing interpretive process via interactions between people and objects, based on past and current experience. Interactions are thus based on the context of physical and social objects, including people and the language they use (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). We thus assume that participants in relationship education frame their experiences through the subjective meanings of their lives, especially those stemming from past interactions (Blumer, 1969).

Mixed Methods Design

We selected a mixed methods approach to get a richer understanding of participants' experiences than a single method would allow (Venkatesh, Brown, & Bala, 2013). Mixed methods research has been called a third methodological paradigm (Venkatesh et al., 2013) that aims to balance subjective meaning with representativeness. In this study, we used

two qualitative methods to seek constructed, nuanced understandings of participants' experiences and a quantitative analysis for a more normative understanding. We used the approach of complementarity, an epistemological view of qualitative and quantitative methods as separate but interrelated approaches (Carroll & Rothe, 2010). Our goal was to examine phenomena that overlap but that may also diverge (DeCuir-Gunby, 2008).

Study Purpose

The aim of this study was to examine the experiences and initial outcomes of low-income single adults who received the PICK program. Using symbolic interactionism, we sought to understand participants' experiences, assumptions about self and others, and meanings surrounding relationships and relationship education. We largely expected process-related insights from the qualitative data and outcome-related insights from the quantitative data, but we used the approach of complementarity (DeCuir-Gunby, 2008) to allow for potentially overlapping and diverging findings.

Our qualitative research questions were as follows: (1) What themes emerged from participants' experiences regarding processes and outcomes in the PICK program? and (2) How did themes of the two qualitative analyses converge or diverge? In addition, we tested two hypotheses using quantitative data. On the basis of prior research, we hypothesized that, relative to retrospective pretest means, participants at posttest would have higher levels on four outcomes: (1) perceived knowledge about *their* (a) relationship skills and (b) healthy partner selection and (2) perceived importance of *a potential partner's* (c) relationship patterns and (d) behaviors and attitudes. In the discussion, we explore the complementarity of our qualitative and quantitative findings.

Method

Sample and Procedures

We included in the study only single participants who were not in committed long-term relationships. PICK targets single individuals and focuses on dating, relationship pacing, and choosing a partner; therefore, the content is far less relevant to coupled participants (who have already chosen partners). Nearly 30% of participants who provided quantitative data were married ($n = 113$), and a further 79 (21%) were currently engaged or in a committed long-term relationship (Work Success allows clients to attend whichever classes interest them, so no one was turned away regardless of relationship status). For these participants, the measures of this study would be temporally invalid, and including these participants would likely bias the results. Table 1 provides a summary of the study participant characteristics.

We used a phenomenological approach to qualitative data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Creswell, 2013). Consistent with symbolic interactionism, phenomenology is an interpretive view of phenomena filtered through lived experience or engagement (Van Manen, 1997), constructed both individually and conjointly (Beitin, 2008). We thus collected two types of qualitative data: focus group interview data to capture co-constructed experiences and short response data to capture individual experiences. We included these two forms of data to triangulate and strengthen the findings (Golafshani, 2003).

Data for this study came from participants in PICK courses offered through a Work Success program for unemployed adults receiving Temporary Assistance to Needy Families funds. Data were collected with approval from our institution's research ethics board over 10 months at nine Department of Workforce Services sites across a Western state in the United States. The course was taught in three weekly sessions. A total of 813 people participated, but only 380 (47%) were present at the third session when quantitative data were collected. Participants included in quantitative analyses had one of three attendance patterns: all three sessions, only one session (i.e., the third session), or two sessions (i.e., the third session and one other session). In Work Success, participants leave the program upon gaining employment. A majority (98%) of the 380 participants who attended the final session completed the survey, and a large majority of participants were women (83%). It is possible that this proportion reflects that poverty occurs at a higher rate among women than among men in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018); it is also possible that the proportion reflects the finding that women tend to be more active in seeking relationship intervention than men (Doss et al., 2003).

Table 1. *Demographic Characteristics of PICK Course and Focus Group Participants*

	Focus Group (n = 10)		Survey (n = 188)	
	n	%	*n*	%
Gender				
Man	2	20.0	32	17.0
Woman	8	80.0	156	83.0
Race or ethnicity				
African American	1	10.0	10	5.5
Asian American	1	10.0	4	2.2
Caucasian	8	80.0	123	68.0
Hispanic or Latino	0	0.0	33	17.7
Native American	0	0.0	4	2.2
Something else	0	0.0	8	4.4
Highest education completed				
Less than high school diploma	1	10.0	17	9.0
High school diploma or equivalent	5	50.0	61	32.4
Some college	1	10.0	42	22.9
College or technical degree	2	20.0	46	24.6
Graduate degree	1	10.0	21	11.2
Divorced	5	50.0	101	53.6
Have children	7	70.0	150	79.6
Worry about insufficient income				
Never or hardly ever	–	–	12	6.5
Once in a while	–	–	28	15.1
Often or almost all the time	–	–	147	78.4
Prior relationship education	–	–	96	51.1
PICK sessions attended				
1 session	0	0.0	68	36.2
2 sessions	0	0.0	46	24.4
3 sessions	10	100.0	74	39.5
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Age (in years)	32.3	9.21	37.3	12.4
Number of children	2.8	2.1	1.9	1.5
Annual income (in U.S. dollars)	17,650	13,400	17,982	17,600

Note. PICK = Premarital Interpersonal Choices and Knowledge program.

Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative focus group data. Interviews were held at two sites immediately after the last class. Participation was voluntary; $20 dollars and a sack lunch were offered to participants. A total of 16 people participated (eight at each site). Comments made by six nonsingle participants were excluded from analysis, leaving 10 single focus group participants. Two coders independently derived themes from the transcribed interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) then independently coded the data. The Kappa score was .81, which indicates strong agreement between the two coders (Viera & Garrett, 2005).

Qualitative short response data. On the posttest survey, participants wrote answers to four open-ended questions asking "reasons for attendance" (168 responses), the "the most important concept you learned" (156 responses), and what was "most helpful" (152 responses) and "least helpful" (136 responses). Because the data were voluminous, themes were derived in two steps. First, two researchers identified recurring patterns and then independently coded data. Kappa scores ranged from .81 to .88, indicating strong agreement between the two coders (Viera & Garrett, 2005). Then, a third researcher independently read and repeatedly

reviewed the raw data and subthemes, allowing main themes to emerge across questions as larger (and sometimes redundant) patterns of experience were noted (Creswell, 2013).

Quantitative survey data. Symbolic interactionism assumes that experiences shape subjective knowledge; thus, we asked participants to rate their perceived knowledge to reflect potential shifts in perception (Blumer, 1969). We used a quantitative posttest-then-retrospective-pretest design for two reasons: First, dosage differed across participants as they entered the program at various points, thus making a presurvey impractical, and second, to address response shift bias (Drennan & Hyde, 2008). For single participants, education is often focused on changes in attitudes and knowledge; thus, response shift may become a methodological issue (i.e., participants realize at posttest the inaccuracy or flaws in their previous ways of thinking). In a recent study of PICK participants, pretest means using the same measures were found to be statistically higher than retrospective pretest means, showing clear evidence of response shift bias (Bradford et al., 2016). Bias may thus be attenuated by using a retrospective design.

Exploratory factor analysis of the 14 items using a promax (oblique) rotation resulted in four factors. The first two captured perceived knowledge of *personal* relationship skills and partner selection, and the latter two captured perceived knowledge of the importance of *a potential partner's* relational patterns and attitudes. To decrease wordiness, we later refer to the four measures as relationship skills, partner selection, relationship patterns, and relationship behaviors and attitudes, respectively.

Perceived knowledge about relationship skills. Participants rated their knowledge of relationship skills using three statements with 5-point Likert-type response options ranging from *disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). Statements included "I understand what it takes to have a healthy relationship," "I know how to communicate well with a partner," and "I have good conflict management skills." Cronbach's alphas were .85 for retrospective pre and .84 for post.

Perceived knowledge about partner selection. Partner selection was assessed using four statements: "I know how to choose the right partner for me," "I know the important things to learn about a potential partner," "I know how to pace a relationship in a safe way," and "I can spot warning signs in relationships." Each item had a 5-point Likert-type set of response options ranging from *disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). Cronbach's alphas were .93 for retrospective pre and .91 for post.

Perceived importance of knowledge about a potential partner's relationship patterns. Perceptions about a potential partner's relationship patterns were measured using the stem question, "How important is it to you to know the following about someone prior to becoming seriously committed?" followed by four items: "What he/she learned from his/her family when growing up," "What he/she has been like in past relationships," "How well he/she gets along with his/her parents," and "What his/her friendships are like." Response options ranged from *unimportant* (1) to *crucially important* (5). Cronbach's alphas were .87 for retrospective pre and .86 for post.

Perceived importance of knowledge about a potential partner's relationship behavior and attitudes. Relationship behaviors and attitudes were measured using the stem question, "How important is it to you to know the following about someone prior to becoming seriously committed?" followed by three items: "How he/she fights when angry," "How he/she reacts when my feelings are hurt," and "What he/she believes about right and wrong." Response options ranged from *unimportant* (1) to *crucially important* (5). Cronbach's alphas were .78 for retrospective pre and .76 for post.

To evaluate the program quantitatively, we examined the impact of the program (i.e., postprogram vs. retrospective preprogram assessments) on the four outcomes just described (i.e., relationship skills, partner selection, relational patterns, relationship behaviors and attitudes). We used a multilevel regression with linear mixed effects model to assess programmatic gains. We selected this approach because mixed effects models do not assume homogeneity of variance, but allow for complex interactions between multiple covariates, both continuous and categorical. Specifically, we used a random intercept multilevel regression model in which scores on the four outcomes at two assessments (retrospective preprogram and postprogram) were nested within participant.

First, we tested whether the program participation was statistically associated with change on the four outcome variables (all main effects were tested simultaneously) even after controlling for demographic covariates. In other words, did participants experience the hypothesized gains on the four outcomes? Second, we tested whether change differed for each outcome by including interactions with outcome level. Did participants gain more on some outcomes than for others? Third, we tested whether change varied by dosage and prior exposure to relationship education by including interactions with dosage and prior exposure. Did participants gain more if they attended more courses or had not previously received relationship education?

Finally, we examined whether change varied by participant age, race or ethnicity, education level, financial worry, gender, and divorce history by adding additional interactions one-at-a-time using a Bonferroni correction to reduce the risk of Type I error. Statistically significant interactions were retained in the final model. Inferential tests on the predictors were conducted using the likelihood ratio test following recommendations of Hox, Moerbeek, and van de Schoot (2018) and using the lmerTest package (Kuznetsova, Brockhoff, & Christensen, 2017) with the Kenward–Roger's method. Analyses were conducted using the lme4 package (Bates, Machler, Boker, & Walker, 2015) in R version 3.5.0 (R Core Team, 2018) and RStudio version 1.1.453 (RStudio Team, 2018). Full details and results of quantitative analyses are available upon request.

Qualitative Results

Focus Group Data

The four themes that emerged from the focus group analyses are reported in order of prominence: motivation to improve relationship patterns, sharing and learning together, changes in skills and understanding, and self-assessment (see Figure 1, left column).

Motivation to improve relationship patterns. The first theme was motivation to change past relationship patterns and learn how not to repeat past mistakes. One woman said, "I am just starting to date after being divorced for 2 years, and I don't want to make the same mistakes [of my past]." Another woman wanted to know "what to look for in myself and what to look for in others. .. because the past [relationships] have not worked out." Other typical responses included "I wanted to find things. .. like red flags. .. [and] to find a healthy way to have a relationship, because mine had not been so healthy."

Sharing and learning from others. The second theme was the normalizing process of sharing and taking comfort knowing that others had relationship difficulties too. A woman said it was good "just knowing that we are not the only one going through it. .. obviously it is not just you." One woman said she would think, "I get to go to class today! I get to talk to other people that understand!" Another woman concurred: "You think 'I am the only one in the world that thinks like this' and when you get in a group setting and they are saying the same things. .. [it] makes it kind of more normal."

Changes in skills and understanding. The third theme was having changed already, or changed attitudes about future relationships. Participants described having learned important skills (e.g., better communication, improved self-respect) and how they would scrutinize potential relationships more closely moving forward. Two respondents reported ending problematic relationships (e.g., "It helped me realize what a jerk he was"). One woman said, "I recently got out of a relationship, and it was very hard for me to walk away but I am learning in this class that it was for the best. That relationship had to come to an end." Two others said that the course helped them know that having already left previous relationships was the right decision, both for them and for their children.

Self-assessment. Self-assessment of one's own problematic attitudes and behaviors emerged as a fourth theme. A man stated, "It was an introspective course. It made us look at ourselves and say 'Hmm, am I that bad?'" A woman said, "I'm doing a little more self-evaluation of my issues. Maybe it's stuff that *I'm* doing, not just that person." An illustrative comment came from a woman who said: "I expected just to look for. .. the jerks. But I come to find out that I am a jerk. Looking at it from both sides instead of just on my side, I'm being selfish." Another woman added, "I think that all of us at one time through these classes have said that."

Figure 1. Complementarity of qualitative themes. PICK = Premarital Interpersonal Choices and Knowledge program; RAM = relationship attachment model.

Focus Group Participants (n = 10)	Short Response Themes (N = 188)
Motivation to Improve Relationships	
• Motivation to improve relationship patterns • Motivation to improve the quality of any future relationship to *avoid "the same mistakes"*	• Motivation to gain relationship knowledge • Motivation to *avoid past mistakes* and improve relationships
Sharing, Learning From Others	**Learning Relationship Pacing**
• Feeling comfortable sharing • Learning that others have had difficulties in past relationships, and learning from others	• Learning relationship pacing • RAM: Learning to pace a relationship by putting knowledge, trust, and intimacy in order • PICK: It takes at least 90 days to get to know someone
Learning (to Change)	
• Anticipated change; behavioral change (scrutinizing or ending relationships) • Attunement to communication skills, self-respect, and commitment	• Gains in relationship knowledge • Learning about skilled communication • Learning the components of commitment
Self-Assessment	
• Insight into own problematic attitudes and behaviors • Insight into need to improve oneself	• Feeling the need to improve oneself • Insight into oneself through self-examination • Self-assessment can be painful, can be empowering

Short Response Data

The four themes that emerged from the short response analyses closely aligned with those of the focus group, although a new theme (the second most prominent in these data) also emerged: Participants wrote that they learned to effectively pace, not rush, a relationship. Themes are reported in order of prominence. The complementarity of qualitative themes is presented in Figure 1.

Motivation to improve relationships. In the first theme, participants described their motivation to improve future relationships and "avoid repeating mistakes." Participants wanted to know "how to make a relationship better." They commonly expressed motivation to seek knowledge about "healthy," "trusting," and "honest" relationships and "to learn about relationships so I can know how to make them work." A woman wrote, "I wanted to learn more about relationships. .. to create an opportunity for a better future."

Similar to the interview data, an important subtheme was motivation to avoid "repeating mistakes due to (having had) lots of unhealthy relationships" and improve future relationships. A woman wrote, "I am just starting to date after my divorce and don't want to make the same mistake." Another wrote, "My biggest problem in life is choosing the wrong guy. I have chosen men who. .. were abusive, had anger problems, and [were] unreliable and unstable." Still another woman commented, "I want to find the right person after five failed relationships." Some were beginning new relationships and hoped to strengthen those relationships; for these participants, a typical response was "I have begun dating now and wanted to take this class to help me figure out what I want."

Learning relationship pacing. The second short response theme was about healthy pacing and the

idea that "you really need to get to know and trust your partner before jumping right in." Two subthemes were PICK's RAM and the principle of taking at least 90 days to get to know someone.

Relationship attachment model. PICK's RAM has five sequential relational components (know, trust, rely, commit, and touch; Van Epp, 2011). One woman wrote that the "RAM gives me something tangible to work with." A man responded, "The RAM model is the coolest thing. It has helped me gauge where the relationship should be and pace the relationship." Another man wrote that the RAM model was important "because I was doing relationship commitment in reverse." Participants indicated that the RAM helped them "understand why I give my trust too easily and have been naïve" and to stay in "the safe zone," "keeping pieces on RAM at correct levels."

Ninety-day principle. PICK participants are taught that it takes talking, togetherness, and time—at least 90 days—to really get to know someone (Van Epp, 2011). "Taking the time (90 days) to really get to know the person—I have rushed relationships before knowing" one woman wrote. Another woman commented that it is "important to really wait a long time, 90 days of dating, to let everything about the person show. Take things slow. .. so history doesn't repeat itself."

Learning about relationship knowledge and skills. Similar to interview data, the third theme emphasized that participants had learned about "the tools for a healthy relationship," including trust, reliance, commitment, communication, compatibility, and conflict resolution. Many mentioned skilled communication and having learned the components of commitment. Some responses were general: "I now know what a healthy relationship looks like." Others specified knowledge or skills they had learned, including "conflict management skills. .. listening," and "communication and patience." One man said he had learned "the specifics on trust and commitment," and participants more generally "learned how to be better communicator[s]."

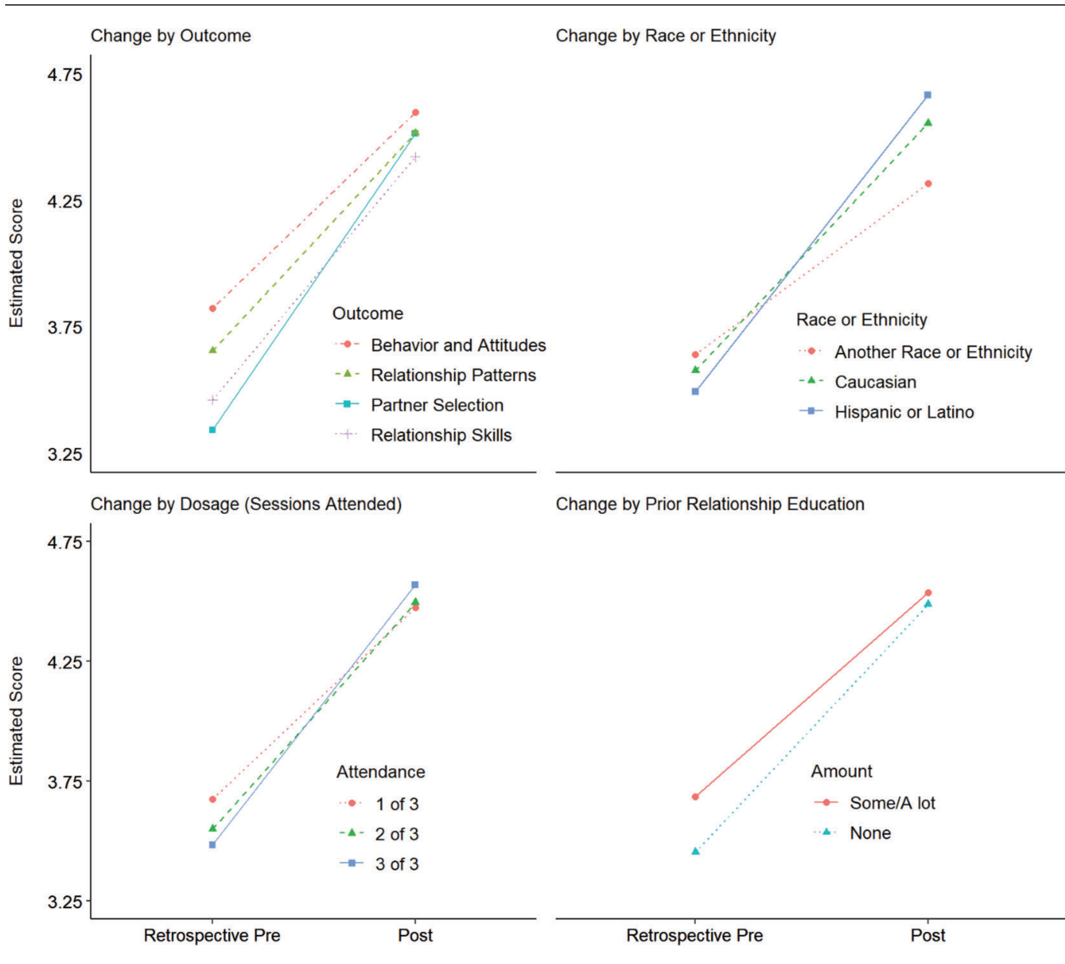
Self-assessment. Similar to the interview data, the fourth theme was self-evaluation. Participants described engaging in self-examination and wanting insight "to become a better person." One woman wrote, "You need to get healthy first, not rely on someone else to make you better or help you get better." A man wrote that the most important thing he had learned was "self-evaluation!" Similarly, another man wrote that what he most valued was "the perspective I gained on myself." A woman wrote that she learned to "continue to improve myself [and] solve my problems so when I meet the right person I'll be ready and not be the jerk!" Some participants described the process of self-evaluation as difficult, saying the course "showed everything I've done wrong." Others stated that the process of self-evaluation was empowering. A man wrote, "I have the power to choose a partner for more than just avoiding loneliness."

Quantitative Results

Multilevel regression modeling was used to analyze the quantitative data. Quantitative analysis was restricted to those with complete data on predictors variables and at least one outcome variable ($n = 134$). After an initial analysis, predictors that were not statistically significant were removed from the model, allowing participants who had missing values on those removed predictors to be included in the final analyses ($n = 165$). There were no statistical differences between the full and analytic sample across all demographic and outcome variables. On the whole, participants gained in knowledge and skills from retrospective pretest to posttest after controlling for age, race or ethnicity, prior relationship education, the number of classes attended (dosage), education level, financial worry, gender, and divorce history, $B = 0.98$, $\chi^2(1) = 907.791$, $p < .001$, $\beta = 0.67$. All outcomes statistically changed after program participation even after controlling for all of the aforementioned covariates (see Figure 2). Gains in knowledge and skills for each outcome were as follows: relationship skills, $B = 0.94$, $t(1100.08) = 13.75$, $p < .001$, $\beta = 0.64$; partner selection, $B = 1.15$, $t(1099.64) = 16.81$, $p < .001$, $\beta = 0.78$; relationship patterns, $B = 0.84$, $t(1100.42) = 12.25$, $p < .001$, $\beta = 0.57$; and behavior and attitudes, $B = 0.76$, $t\ (1100.87) = 11.01$, $p < .001$, $\beta = 0.52$.

Our analyses also tested whether change from retrospective pretest to posttest varied by prior experience with relationship education, dosage,

Figure 2. Change between retrospective pretest and posttest according to outcome, race or ethnicity, dosage, and prior relationship education.



and (using a Bonferroni correction) demographic covariates. All interactions are shown in Figure 2. Participants who had previously received relationship education through courses, counseling, workshops, and other sources gained less than those who had not, $B = -0.18$, $t(1106.82) = -3.60$, $p < .001$, $\beta = -0.11$. It is important to note, however, that the key difference was that those with prior relationship education had higher pretest scores, which may highlight the effectiveness of prior relationship education. Gains were greater for participants who attended three sessions compared to only one, $B = 0.29$, $t(1105.96) = 4.99$, $p < .001$, $\beta = 0.16$. Again, this result was due to differences at the pretest. The lower scores at pretest for those with the full dosage are likely because those are the participants who could fully assess their preprogram understanding and skills in light of the full curriculum when doing the pretest retrospectively. Gains were also greater for those who attended three sessions compared with only two, $B = 0.14$, $t(1112.91) = 2.27$, $p = .023$, $\beta = 0.08$, and for those who attended two sessions compared with only one, $B = 0.15$, $t(1111.14) = 2.27$, $p = .023$, $\beta = 0.07$.

The only demographic covariate that statistically moderated change from pretest to posttest was race or ethnicity: There was a statistically greater difference in reported change for participants who identified as Hispanic or Latino compared with those who identified as Caucasian, $B = 0.19$, $t(1120.05) = 2.91$, $p < .001$, $\beta = 0.07$. However, this difference was not statistically

significant in the model including nonsignificant covariates ($p = .063$). In contrast, participants who identified as any non-White race or ethnicity (Native American, African American, Pacific Islander/Asian, or *other*) reported less change than participants who identified as Caucasian, $\beta = -0.30$, $t(1099.42) = -4.11$, $p < .001$, $\beta = -0.10$. Interpretation of this finding is problematic, however, because the sample in this study was not particularly diverse, and therefore all participants who identified in a racial or ethnic group that was too small to evaluate on its own were lumped together. Finally, it is important to note that all three racial or ethnic groups made statistically significant increases from retrospective pretest to posttest.

Discussion

Using complementarity (DeCuir-Gunby, 2008) and symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969), we discuss processes and outcomes that emerged from the data, then examine convergence and divergence of the qualitative and quantitative analyses. Consistent with a view that meaning is constructed via interaction (Carter & Fuller, 2016), the data overall show changes in attitudes and knowledge about relationships and point toward behavioral change.

Processes and Findings

For these low-income adults, past experiences with problematic relationships emerged as a powerful motivator. From a symbolic perspective, participants' desires to "avoid repeating mistakes because past relationships have not worked out" underscore meaning carried from prior relational interactions (Blumer, 1969). Interview data showed that it was through interactions with other participants that individuals normalized and changed their perceptions, thus allowing them to co-construct new meanings about relationships. Conversely, the write-in data highlighted the utility of course information (particularly regarding relationship pacing) in modifying attitudes and meanings about relationships. Past research has documented stronger short-term effect sizes of relationship education among more distressed couples (Blanchard et al., 2009), and has suggested that more distressed couples may benefit the most from relationship education (Wadsworth & Markman, 2012). Our findings provide evidence that single participants who have experienced previous relationship distress see the need for relationship education and benefit from it.

Another important process was that of self-examination. In interview and written data, participants described their own attitudinal shifts vis-à-vis appropriate behavior–behavior they had presumably accepted in the past, but intended to change in the future (e.g., "I found I was the 'jerkette' and there are things that I want to change"). Introspection has not been a common focus of attention in relationship education, but it was a pervasive theme among these adults, half of whom were divorced. This, coupled with motivation from previous unsuccessful relationships, suggests the possibility of qualitative differences in how single low-income participants may view both the need for, and utility of, relationship education. More generally, the qualitative results suggest that patterns from previous relationships can potentially be changed by ending problematic relationships and by learning to improve future relationships through relationship pacing, communication, and conflict management skills.

Participant responses showed clear evidence of changes in attitudes. In symbolic interactionism, one's sense of self and of a generalized other develops through social interaction, particularly via what one believes from interactions with others (Cooley, 1956). Participants described shifts in thoughts about a romantic generalized other toward healthier relationships. The quantitative results confirmed these attitudinal shifts, and qualitative data confirmed that some behavioral changes had already begun.

Complementarity of Findings

Both qualitative and quantitative results were consistent with past research, suggesting that relationship education for singles is associated with a decline in irrational beliefs about relationships (Adler-Baeder et al., 2007; Bass, Drake, & Linney, 2007; Van Epp et al., 2008), an increase in communication and conflict resolution skills (Antle et al., 2013), and learning about relationship knowledge and partner selection (Adler-Baeder et al., 2007; Bradford et al., 2016). Three of the four qualitative themes converged (see Figure 1), offering broader process-related information than a focus on program content alone. Although the quantitative results confirmed the gains in knowledge

that participants described qualitatively, there was divergence. Qualitative data underscored processes of *self-assessment*, and quantitative data showed participants gained knowledge about *a potential partner's* relationship patterns and attitudes.

A key question of this study was the extent to which low-income participants would benefit. The qualitative data suggest that problematic relationship patterns drove motivation for participants to learn skills (pacing, communication, commitment), to begin to change behavior, and to engage in a process of self-assessment. The quantitative results showed strong, positive effects relative to relationship skills, partner selection, and the relational patterns, behaviors, and attitudes of a potential partner. Meta-analytic research suggests that relationship education may have modest impact among low-income participants (Hawkins & Erickson, 2015), with larger effects for one-group/pre–post studies. By comparison, the beta coefficients in the present study were relatively large. Moreover, worry about finances did not emerge as a statistically significant covariate with programmatic gains within this study, suggesting consistent benefit independent of money concerns.

Limitations

Attrition rates were high (about 52%) because all participants actively sought employment as part of the larger program, and approximately half found employment and left the program. Still, this real-world limitation should also be seen as an indicator of the success of the larger program given that roughly half of them obtained employment, and the gains documented in these results come from those who remained unemployed at that time. Such compromises may need to be accommodated to offer relationship education through extant programs.

An important limitation is this study's lack of a control or comparison group. Moreover, the study lacks longitudinal measures to enable systematic examination of the program's impact on behavior. The sample was also predominantly female, and the results may therefore not reflect male perspectives. The sample composition, however, may generally reflect the gendered nature of poverty in the United States. Another limitation may be the use of a retrospective survey design. The limitations of retrospective methodology include demand characteristics and the potential for memory-related influence on participant recall (Pratt, McGuigan, & Katzev, 2000), and we were unable to triangulate the quantitative data using a traditional pretest–posttest comparison. However, prior research documenting response shift bias in pretest methodology (Bradford et al., 2016) suggests that the retrospective design may mitigate bias (Drennan & Hyde, 2008).

Implications. Despite limitations, this study documents positive processes and results in reaching low-income participants. Education was embedded in the Work Success program, and although participants left the program once employed (and dosage thus varied), it was still positively impactful even at lower dosage. Program administrators in particular may note that delivering programming to low-income individuals as an adjunct to a larger program may be effective, even if relationship education is not central to the main program goal (Ooms & Wilson, 2004). Policy makers may note that this study provides support for the positive impact of relationship education for low-income *singles*. Another important finding is the aspect of relationship distress: These single participants with previous relationship distress saw the need for relationship education and benefited from it. Consequently, relationship education may possibly be an effective adjunct or, as appropriate, even an alternative to psychotherapy.

Relationship educators should note the qualitative shifts in participants' thinking, which they described as occurring through social association with one another. These exchanges of symbols (Blumer, 1969) created shift in meaning (e.g., normalizing their processes; learning positive new directions rather than repeating past mistakes). These data underscore for educators the importance of facilitating the power of group process and discussion and the transformative potential of pursuing positive new directions, built on learning from (and not just suffering from or even repeating) the past.

Some of the qualitative data hint at the social and economic challenges that make relationship formation and stability difficult (Cherlin, 2009; Sassler, 2010). The most apparent of these seems to be motivation not to repeat patterns from past relationships. Although modest, these findings suggest that some risk factors associated with low income may be amenable to positive

change (Hawkins & Fackrell, 2010) and that relationships are a relevant target of intervention for low-income individuals (Hawkins & Ooms, 2010). This study offers glimpses into elements that facilitate initial change among low-income participants. In addition to further exploration of the processes of relationship education in low-income contexts, further research is needed on short- and long-term behavioral outcomes in individually focused relationship education.

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