Comment

A More Optimistic Perspective on Government-Supported Marriage and Relationship Education Programs for Lower Income Couples

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In the past decade, the federal government, some states, and numerous communities have initiated programs to help couples form and sustain healthy marriages and relationships in order to increase family stability for children. Thus, we value the attention given to this emerging policy area by the American Psychologist in a recent article (Johnson, May–June 2012). However, it is important to challenge some of Johnson’s points about the effectiveness and reach of interventions to lower income couples and couples of color and his suggested prioritization of basic over applied research.

Johnson (2012) questioned whether marriage and relationship education (MRE) initiatives targeted to lower income individuals and/or minorities can be effective in anything like their current forms because much of the research on MRE has been based on middle-class, Caucasian couples. Johnson pointed to two large, rigorous evaluation studies with lower income, racially and ethnically diverse couples: Building Strong Families (BSF; Wood, McConnell, Moore, Clarkwest, & Hsueh, 2010) and Supporting Healthy Marriages (SHM; Hsueh et al., 2012). As Johnson accurately noted, the statistically significant effects in one study (SHM) were small, and in the other (BSF), significant results were confined mostly to one large site that was successful in retaining participants for substantial doses of the intervention (Oklahoma City). The significant effects in these two trials are indeed modest; improvements are needed. But we believe these and other studies provide some basis for optimism in this area of preventive education, especially in light of the fact that many more costly government-supported programs, including teen pregnancy prevention, drug abuse interventions, and employment services, have struggled to document significant impacts (see the 2011 GAO report on jobs programs, where the rarely documented effects tend “to be small, inconclusive, or restricted to short-term impacts” [United States Government Accountability Office, 2011, p. 11]).

Given Johnson’s (2012) primary arguments about couples of color, it is noteworthy that he gave brief and no attention, respectively, to findings from the large-scale trials he mentioned that minority couples were more likely to show significant benefits (African American couples in BSF [Wood et al., 2010] and Hispanic couples in SHM [Hsueh et al., 2012]). There are other studies that Johnson did not mention, and that he may not or could not have known about in writing his critique, that support our basis for more optimism in MRE efforts. In a recent meta-analysis of 50 programs supported by federal funds (-reaching nearly 50,000 lower income participants) and evaluated by program providers with pre–post field data (no control group), statistically significant, generally moderate effect sizes were found for each target population and outcome assessed, and these effects were generally stronger for less educated participants (Hawkins & Fellows, 2011). In a rigorous randomized controlled trial study of nearly 500 young and married Army couples in a stressful context (e.g., deployments), those receiving one of the most tested MRE programs had a significantly lower likelihood of divorce one year following training (Stanley, Allen, Markman, Rhoades, & Prentice, 2010). These participants were lower income couples (although they cannot be compared to low-income civilian couples with less access to various resources). Moreover, the two-year outcomes in this study (being prepared for publication) showed the significant divorce reduction effect was maintained and that minority couples received the largest divorce reduction effect. Other studies also are demonstrating significant impacts from MRE efforts with lower income and/or minority couples (Bradley, Friend, & Gottman, 2011). In addition, one such study even showed positive effects on parenting and children’s problem behaviors (Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, Pruett, & Wong, 2009)....
that may or may not apply to disad
dvantaged couples. While broadening the
knowledge of risk models has the potential
to contribute to progress, as suggested by
Johnson, so does ongoing feedback be-
tween tests of theory and application.

Johnson (2012) also questioned
whether disadvantaged couples can be
reached with these types of efforts. Reach
is, indeed, crucial. Again, we take note of
the evidence from recent federally sup-
ported efforts. For example, Bradbury and
Lavner (2012) suggested that the
SHM study provided “real cause for optimism”
regarding reach: 75% of the 6,300 couples
were below 200% of the poverty line, only
30% were White (non-Hispanic), and 80%
completed an average of 20 hours of the
intervention (pp. 118–119). This evidence
of reach and sustained interest among
lower income couples has been encourag-
ing if not remarkable, and work on effect-
ive outreach to disadvantaged and minor-
ity individuals is progressing.

With emerging findings and practical
knowledge gained in lower income com-
nunities from all across the United States
over the past decade, we see evidence to
support optimism for the potential utility of
MRE programs to help disadvantaged and
minority couples. Accordingly, continued
support for these efforts is justified.
We anticipate that the potential of these
first-generation programs will only increase as
the research Johnson (2012) called for ad-
vances our understanding of low-income
and minority couple relationships, as more
programs are rigorously evaluated, and as
we learn and disseminate best practices
from programs now in the field. Even small
program effects are likely to produce signi-
ficant taxpayer savings given the public
(and private) costs associated with family
instability and relationship dysfunction.

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Optimistic or Quixotic? More
Data on Marriage and Relationship
Education Programs for Lower Income
Couples

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I am gratified and encouraged that such an
esteemed group of relationship scientists as
Hawkins et al. (2013, this issue) want to
continue the discussion of government-
supported marriage and relationship educa-
tion (MRE) programs for lower income
couples by responding to my article (John-
son, May–June 2012). In their comment, they
argued that there are data that support the
efficacy of MRE programs for disad-
vantaged couples and that the benefits of
these programs outweigh the costs. My re-
response to both of these points follows.

Data Do Not Support the Efficacy
of MRE Programs for Disadvantaged
Couples

Hawkins et al. (2013) noted that MRE pro-
grams for poor couples and families of
color are more effective than I suggested.
They pointed to a few individual variables
across multiple studies in which there were
small, but significant, effects. The authors
found cause for optimism in these incon-
sistent and small effects across many stud-
ies. The data they cited have three prob-
lems that strongly suggest a need for
greater skepticism rather than optimism.

First, the data they cited were se-
lected in a way that suggests that their
conclusions may be resting on Type I error
because they failed to mention how many of
the outcome variables within each study
were null. For example, they wrote that the
15-month outcome data for the Building
Strong Families (BSF; Wood, McConnell,
Moore, Clarkwest, & Hsuhe, 2010) study
had “significant results [that] were confined
mostly to one large site that was successful
in retaining participants for substantial
doses of the intervention (Oklahoma City)”
(Hawkins et al., 2013, p. 110); however,
there were actually two sites that showed
small effects—one had negative effects
(Baltimore) and one had positive effects.
In another example, the authors cited a study
(Bradley, Friend, & Gottman, 2011) as
“demonstrating significant impacts from MRE efforts” (Hawkins et al., 2013, p.
110), but they failed to mention that only
women’s relationship satisfaction im-

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