

# Comment

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## 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 sug-

gested 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 pro-

viders 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). Another study suggests that impacts from these government-supported programs may be beginning to register at the demographic level (Hawkins, Amato, & Kinghorn, in press).

Johnson (2012) also suggested that lackluster impacts from the recent efforts were based on inadequate basic science about the risks and developmental course of relationships for low-income and minority couples. We agree that there needs to be more research on basic risk and protective factors, and we think the emphasis he places on the role of stress in the lives of low-income couples is particularly promising. In fact, such research was influential in the adaptation of interventions in the large-scale intervention studies cited earlier. Further, there was more reliance on empiricism in many efforts than the subtitle of Johnson's article would suggest. We also are not convinced by his assertion that there is, at present, one "best supported model of marriage" (Johnson, 2012, p.

301) that may or may not apply to disadvantaged couples. While broadening the knowledge of risk models has the potential to contribute to progress, as suggested by Johnson, so does ongoing feedback between 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 supported 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 encouraging if not remarkable, and work on effective outreach to disadvantaged and minority individuals is progressing.

With emerging findings and practical knowledge gained in lower income communities 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 advances 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 significant 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 education (MRE) programs for lower income couples by responding to my article (Johnson, May–June 2012). In their comment, they argued that there are data that support the efficacy of MRE programs for disadvantaged couples and that the benefits of these programs outweigh the costs. My 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 programs 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 inconsistent and small effects across many studies. The data they cited have three problems that strongly suggest a need for greater skepticism rather than optimism.

First, the data they cited were selected 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, & Hsueh, 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-