Title: All in the family: Understanding individual, couple, and contextual differences in a sample of low-income Hispanic, African-American, and White Couples to inform programs targeting couples and families

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Type: Poster

Since the 1960s, Americans have tended to marry later with more of those marriages ending in separation or divorce. Although the trend towards later marriage has been fairly uniform by social class, the gap in marital instability has widened in recent decades. Children born to disadvantaged mothers have been shown to spend only half of their childhoods in families with two married parents (Cherlin, 2005; Bumpass & Lu, 2000). At the same time, an expanding body of literature concludes that living in single parent households and fathers' disengagement with their children are associated with less optimal cognitive, social, and emotional outcomes for children from infancy to adolescence (e.g., Cowan, Cowan, Cohen, Pruett, & Pruett, 2008; Pruett, 2000; Tamis-LeMonda & Cabrera, 2002).

There is a growing policy interest in increasing father involvement in children's lives as a means of improving the wellbeing of low-income children. However, while many government officials promote fatherhood programs aimed at fathers alone as a means of increasing the amount of contact children have with their male parent, recent evaluations suggest that interventions targeted at improving inter-parental relationships may be more likely to influence fathers' engagement and positive socio-emotional outcomes for low-income children., and may increase father involvement indirectly by improving the quality of the interparental relationship and reducing separations, divorces, and single parenthood (e.g., Cowan et al., 2008).

Two quite different explanations have been advanced to explain why some fathers are more involved in their children's lives while others are either less involved or absent. A widely-accepted deficit model of father involvement (Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997) assumes that the pervasive social problem of "fatherlessness" in America has resulted from a decline in "family values" and a lack of motivation on the part of men to maintain relationships with their spouse and child (Blankenhorn, 1995; Popenoe, 1996). These conclusions underlie interventions designed to persuade men to become "more responsible." By contrast, an ecological (Belsky, 1984; Bronfenbrenner, 1979) or family systems, risk-protection-outcome model (Cowan & Cowan, 2000; Doherty, Kouneski & Erickson, 1998; Pruett, Insabella, & Gustafson, 2005) suggests that there are multiple systemic factors -- a combination of barriers and resources within individuals, families, and environments -- that shape both the quantity and quality of fathers' engagement with their children, such as: (a) Individual family members' mental

health and psychological distress; (b) The patterns of both couple and parent-child relationships transmitted across the generations from grandparents to parents to children; (c) The quality of the relationship between the parents, including communication styles, conflict resolution, problem-solving styles, and emotion regulation; (d) The quality of the mother-child and father-child relationships; and (e) Cultural influences and ideologies, socioeconomic context, life stressors and social supports outside the immediate family. The family systems model suggests that interventions need to focus on reducing the multiple risks and enhancing the multiple protective factors associated with father engagement.

Despite a consensus that marital research, particularly intervention research in this area, could greatly benefit from more ethnically diverse samples, most marital research continues to be composed of samples of primarily White middle-class families. Moreover, in the large majority of experimental and nonexperimental studies of relationship skills programs, the curricula were developed for middle to upper class white populations. Thus, we know very little about the risk and protective characteristics of racially and ethnically diverse low-income married couples, and particularly fathers in these families, that might have future implications for father involvement, as well as the quality of interparental relationship and marital stability. By learning about these differences, we can better inform policy makers and program operators about how to tailor services to meet the needs of this diverse population. The proposed study, in line with a family systems, risk-protection-outcome model, aims to address this gap in the literature by describing the individual, couple and contextual characteristics of a low-income sample of married couples drawn from the Supporting Healthy Marriage Evaluation (SHM evaluation), and how these characteristics might vary for subgroups of the sample defined by racial and ethnic background – namely, Hispanic, African American, and White individuals/couples.

SHM is the first large-scale, multi-site, rigorous test of relationship education programs for low-income married couples in the United States and the evaluation consists of data collected during study enrollment, as well as two waves of follow-up conducted 12 and 30 months after enrollment. In the proposed study, measures collected on individual characteristics are age, race/ethnicity, marital status and history of past marriage, education, length of U.S. residency, employment and income, adult mental health, adult substance abuse, adult physical health, family structure of family of origin, and abuse and neglect in childhood. To characterize couples in the sample, we collected information on household composition, religiosity of the couple, and couple relationship quality (composed of scales of relationship satisfaction, engagement, and levels of conflict). Finally, to describe contextual characteristics of the sample, we collected information on the presence of non-custodial children, acute and chronic stressors including socioeconomic stressors, levels of social support from outside the immediate family, attitudes toward relationships, and shared social values.

By leveraging the available data from the SHM evaluation, the proposed study aims to describe the population of low-income couples who volunteer to receive relationship skills education. This sample is drawn from those who are actively seeking relationship skills education and thus represents a different population than other national studies of the general population of couples and families (e.g., NSFH), but may be a more relevant source of information about the characteristics of the population that program operators are most likely able to recruit and retain in relationship education services. Thus, while this sample is not representative of the broader population of low-income married couples, it may be more relevant for informing the real-world characteristics of low-income couples that programs and

services are able to engage. Baseline data collected to date indicate that the SHM sample is diverse; we anticipate that about 44% of the SHM study sample will be composed of Hispanic non-White individuals, and a more nominal percentage of couples, about 16%, will be of African-American descent. The remaining sample will most likely be made up of White couples (30%) as well as small numbers (about 10%) of Asian and other race/ethnicities.

With Hispanic populations growing rapidly in the United States and African-American families comprising a significant portion of the study sample in sites located in urban areas (such as the Bronx and Seattle), it has become increasingly important to parse out ways that racial subgroups within this low-income demographic of couples may differ in order to properly adapt relationship skills curricula and train program staff for working with these populations. Moreover, the population enrolled in the SHM sample is particularly interesting for this purpose because all the families volunteered to participate in services and are representative of a group actively seeking services. Existing demographic research is typically limited to larger national studies such as the Current Population Survey and the National Survey and Families and Households, which although rich in data, describe the population as a whole rather than those families pointedly seeking relationship education and programming.

Research Questions:

This poster will use the full sample of low-income couples enrolled in the Supporting Healthy Marriage project (>6,000 couples) to answer the following three research questions:

1. How do individual, couple, and contextual characteristics describing the SHM sample differ from previous studies describing the full population of low-income couples in the United States?
2. How do individual characteristics, such as age, race/ethnicity, education, income, and employment differ for Hispanic, African-American, and White families enrolled in the SHM sample?
3. How do couple characteristics, such as relationship satisfaction, relationship engagement, and levels of relationship conflict differ for Hispanic, African-American, and White couples enrolled in the SHM sample?
4. How do contextual characteristics such as cultural influences and ideologies, socioeconomic context, life stressors and social supports outside the immediate family differ for Hispanic, African-American, and White couples enrolled in the SHM sample?

Sample

In 2003, MDRC began to explore options for studying an intervention targeted at low-income couples when it launched the Supporting Healthy Marriage (SHM) demonstration. Based in part on the Building Strong Families project, SHM is the first large-scale, multi-site, rigorous test of relationship education programs for low-income married couples in the United States. Supported by the Administration for Children and Families at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the project is motivated by research indicating that children raised by two parents in low-conflict married families do better on a host of outcomes. Low-income couples face greater challenges in building and maintaining healthy relationships however, and their children are consequently less likely to receive these benefits. Implemented by local

program operators in ten geographically diverse sites across the country, SHM employs a random assignment study design to test the efficacy of a year-long voluntary program targeted at parents, theorizing that the long-term impacts will benefit the children of couples receiving services. The program model includes marriage education workshops, booster groups, couple- and family-oriented social activities, and assistance from a family support worker to help couples incorporate new skills into daily life and connect to community resources. To enroll in the study, participants must be married, older than 18 years old, have a child younger than 18 years old, and be able to understand one of the languages that the program is offered (all programs offer English and/or Spanish services). In addition, it is preferable that the family's income not be greater than 200% of the federal poverty guideline.

Measures

Upon enrolling in the SHM study, all individual participants completed a baseline information form providing basic descriptive information about themselves, as well as a Self-Administered Questionnaire which asked personal questions about participants' relationships, mental health, substance abuse, and children. Measures collected on individual characteristics are age, race/ethnicity, marital status and history of past marriage, education, length of U.S. residency, employment, and income, adult mental health, adult substance abuse, adult physical health, family structure of family of origin, and abuse and neglect in childhood. To characterize couples in the sample, we collected information on household composition, religiosity of the couple, and couple relationship quality (composed of scales of relationship satisfaction, engagement, and levels of conflict). Finally, to describe contextual characteristics of the sample, we collected information on the presence of non-custodial children, acute and chronic stressors including socioeconomic stressors, levels of social support from outside the immediate family, attitudes toward relationships, and shared social values. Hence, we have a very rich data set providing us with information not only on study participants' demographics, but also on the quality of their relationships. All baseline data is self-reported by adult study participants.

Analysis Plan

The analyses for this study will primarily be descriptive, as well as regression-based and chi-square analyses, to characterize the full SHM study sample and describe differences in the examined characteristics between three major racial/ethnic subgroups who are seeking relationship education services for low-income families.

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