

A More Optimistic Perspective on Government-Supported Marriage and Relationship Education  
Programs for Lower Income Couples: Response to Johnson (2012)

Alan J. Hawkins, Brigham Young University

Scott M. Stanley, University of Denver

Philip A. Cowan, University of California, Berkeley

Frank D. Fincham, Florida State University

Steven R. H. Beach, University of Georgia

Carolyn Pape Cowan, University of California, Berkeley

Galena Kline Rhoades, University of Denver

Howard J. Markman, University of Denver

Andrew P. Daire, University of Central Florida

Submitted to *American Psychologist*. Please do not cite without permission from the first author.

## **Abstract**

This article is a comment on Johnson's (2012) critique of federal public policy supporting healthy marriage and relationship education (MRE) programs that was published recently in the *American Psychologist*. We challenge some of Johnson's primary points about the effectiveness and reach of interventions to lower income and minority couples, as well as his suggested prioritization of basic research over applied research. We find more reason for optimism than does Johnson in this line of research and policy experimentation.

## A More Optimistic Perspective on Government-Supported Marriage and Relationship Education Programs for Lower Income Couples: Response to Johnson (2012)

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 to this emerging policy area by *American Psychologist* in a recent article (Johnson, 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 questions 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 points to two large, rigorous evaluation studies with lower income, racially and ethnically diverse couples: Building Strong Families (BSF: Wood et al., 2010) and Supporting Healthy Marriages (SHM: Hsueh et al., 2012). As Johnson accurately notes, 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,” p. 11).

Given Johnson’s primary arguments about couples of color, it is noteworthy that he gives brief and no attention, respectively, to findings from the large-scale trials he mentions 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 does not mention, and 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 RCT 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) show the significant divorce reduction effect is maintained, and that minority couples receive 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, 2012).

Johnson also suggests that lackluster impacts from the recent efforts are 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 suggests. We also are not convinced by his assertion that there is, at present, one "best supported model of marriage" (p. 6) 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, consistent with the Institute of Medicine's prevention development cycle (O'Connell et al., 2009).

Johnson also questions 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. 118-9). 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 (Carlson et al., 2012).

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 the potential of these first-generation programs will only increase as the research Johnson calls 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.

## References

- Bradbury, T. N., & Lavner, J. A. (2011). How can we improve preventive and educational interventions for intimate relationships? *Behavior Therapy, 43*, 113 - 22.
- Bradley, R. P. C., Friend, D. J., & Gottman, J. M. (2011). Supporting healthy relationships in low-income, violent couples: Reducing conflict and strengthening relationship skills and satisfaction. *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy, 10*, 97-116.
- Carlson, R. G., Daire, A. P., Munyon, M. D., Soto, D., Bennett, A., Marshall, D., & McKenzie, C. (2012). Examining recruitment follow-up phone calls and their influence on attendance for husbands and wives in a marriage and relationship education program. *Marriage & Family Review, 48*, 82-95.
- Cowan, P. A., Cowan, C. P., Pruett, M. K., Pruett, K., & Wong, J. J. (2009). Promoting fathers' engagement with children: Preventative interventions for low-income families. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 71*, 663-679.
- Hawkins, A. J., Amato, P. R., & Kinghorn, A. (2012). Are government-supported healthy marriage initiatives affecting family demographics? A state-level analysis. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Hawkins, A. J., & Fellows, K. J. (2011). *Findings from the field: A meta-analytic study of the effectiveness of healthy marriage and relationship education programs*. Washington D.C.: The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center. Available at: <http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org/resource-detail/index.aspx?rid=3928>.
- Hsue, J., Alderson, D. P., Lundquist, E., Michalopoulos, C., Gubits, D., Fein, D., & Knox, V. (2012). *The Supporting Healthy Marriage evaluation: Early impacts on low-income*

*families*. OPRE Report 2012-11. Washington D.C.: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Johnson, M. D. (2012). Healthy marriage initiatives: On the need for empiricism in policy implementation. *American Psychologist*, *67*, 296-308.

O'Connell, M. E., Boat, T., Warner, K. E. (2009). *Preventing mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders among young people: Progress and possibilities*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.

Stanley, S. M., Allen, E. S., Markman, H. J., Rhoades, G. K., & Prentice, D. (2010). Decreasing divorce in Army couples: Results from a randomized clinical trial using PREP for Strong Bonds. *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy*, *9*, 149-160.

United States Government Accountability Office. (2011). *Multiple employment and training programs: Providing information on colocating services and consolidating administrative structures could promote efficiencies* (Report No. GAO-11-92). Washington DC: Author.

Wood, R. G., McConnell, S., Moore, Q., Clarkwest, A., & Hsueh, J. (2010, May). *The Building Strong Families project: Strengthening unmarried parents' relationships: The early impacts of Building Strong Families*. Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.