Does Marriage (and Relationship) Education Work?

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&
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&
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Question:
“Why does the answer matter?”

One Answer:
The Context of Instability for Children
The “Perfect Storm” October 30, 1991
Commitment Clarity

• Clear, lasting commitments can provide security:
  – A predictable future for partners
  – Family stability for children

• But instability for children keeps increasing.
  – Divorce
  – Parental break-up among never marrieds
  – Lack of an ongoing relationship among partners who have a child

• That is not to say stability was always wonderful for all.
  – But aspects of it worked pretty well for a large percentage of people, and especially for many children.
And always worth noting . . .

• Children are resilient & Many single parents do a terrific job.

• But let’s consider how much things have changed for so many.
One Example

• Sara McLanahan (2011): on findings from the national Fragile Family Project:

“Stability in the romantic lives of single mothers is very rare.”

“. . . the average number of changes in dating partnership was nearly four times as high among unmarried mothers as compared with married mothers, 1.46 versus .35.”
The Attachment-Disruption Cycle
The Perfect Storm

• Societal conditions are generating high numbers of people with:
  – insecurities about attachment and
  – low confidence about relationships and marriage . . .

• . . . at a time when we’ve been dismantling protective structures for developing relationships.

Ambiguity Has Become Common Replacing Clarity in Commitment

• Examples: Cohabitation before marriage or engagement; hook-ups; break-ups

• Q: Why would ambiguity become popular?

• Q: What about insecure attachment styles?
  • Avoidant attachment style
  • Anxious attachment style
A symptom of growing ambiguity:

Sliding vs. Deciding
High Cost Slides

• A person slides into something that is potentially life altering.

• After the slide, she/he has fewer options.

• She/he then finds out information that would have been better to know BEFORE sliding into the situation.
Why Deciding Matters: Decisions Set up Follow-Through

- In long-term relationships like marriage, Deciding transitions should set up stronger follow-through than sliding transitions.

“I choose you.”

“I chose this path.”
The Wrong Argument to Have

• Does marriage magically make better parents? No!

• Something used to be very different, though.

• Social customs had pushed partners to clarify commitment to a future together, usually in marriage, BEFORE having children.
An Example from other research of ours of what predicts stability in unmarried relationships
Relationship Development Study

- NICHD Funded Study (Stanley, Rhoades, Markman)
- **1500, 18 to 34 year old, unmarrieds**
- Many joint investments are related to remaining together, for example (Rhoades et al., 2010):
  - shared gym membership
  - sharing a cell plan
  - having vacation plans
  - joint lease or buy home together
  - joint account
  - paying on each other’s credit card
- Representative (race, income) of US unmarried, English speaking, 18 to 34 year olds.
Material Constraints: Focused on this Stage of Relationships

• “Joint Activities Checklist”: 25 external factors
  – paying on each other’s credit cards
  – having a pet together
  – paid for future vacation plans
  – making home improvements together
  – signing a lease
  – having a joint-bank account
  – cell phone contract together
  – joint gym membership
  – buying a home

Predicting Remaining Together

• Each increase of one point on that Material Constraint scale increases likelihood of being together one year later by 10%.

• Guess what does not add to the prediction of these unmarried couples remaining together?

Having a child together

Implications of the New Paradigms in Relationship Formation

• More young adults will have very consequential relationship events before they have decided what they want in life.

• For many, constraints build before dedication is mutual; this can mean getting stuck in a poorer quality relationship.

• Even for many couples who can make it, commitment is more likely not to have formed ideally, and patterns learned from family and the culture may undermine success in family life.
These Examples Focus Only Commitment: Other Dimensions Matter Also

• Think about modeling young people are exposed to now about romantic relationships.
  – What do they learn about respect?
  – What do they learn about conflict?
  – What do they learn about communication?
The Need
There is a growing need to help . . .

. . . teens and younger adults to make better decisions in potentially life altering relationships.

. . . individuals who have been through difficult transitions that impact life options (e.g., divorce, out-of-wedlock births) to move their life trajectories toward their goals.
There is a growing need to help . . .

. . . couples to form and strengthen lasting and healthy relationships and marriages—particularly parents who are raising children.
Relationship Education: One Part of an Overall Strategy

Evidence of the Impact of Relationship Education
Relationship Education

- Not therapy or counseling

- Educational strategies
  - Skills
  - Knowledge
  - Goal to increase the odds of developing and securing healthy relationships
Types of Relationship Education

• Couple focused (examples)
  – Married couples
  – Premarital couples
  – Coupes in transition to parenthood

• Individually focused (examples)
  – High school students
  – Single (or partnered) parents on TANF
  – Father involvement focused services
The Oklahoma Marriage Initiative

• 1998 OU and OSU economists produced a study suggesting that social trends were hurting Oklahoma's economy.
  – high divorce rate
  – high rates of out-of-wedlock births
  – high rates of child deaths because of child abuse.

• In 1999, Governor Frank Keating of Oklahoma announced a goal to reduce divorce by 33%.
• The role of Welfare Reform and TANF Priorities and Funding in the OMI

• Oklahoma Department of Human Services initiated a strategic effort to develop a multi-sector initiative.
Oklahoma

• Rolled out training in relationship education services to reach many groups. **Examples:**
  – Couples (engaged, married, expecting, etc.)
  – High Schools students
  – College students, Vo-Tech Students
  – TANF recipients (e.g., orientation classes)
  – Military families
  – Families affected by incarceration
  – Foster and adoptive couples
  – Fathers (single, married, co-parenting)
About that M word . . .

• The focus has been, in OK and nationally, far broader than implied by “Marriage” initiatives or programs

• The use of the term “Marriage Promotion” is almost always a sign the person has not been close to much of what has really gone on
As of 2012

• Over 315,000 people have been served.
  – And have 3,750 community volunteers

• This is an amazing achievement, and Oklahoma is known worldwide for what has been happening here.
  – (e.g., I recently gave a talk to policy makers in London, Feb. 2012 that heavily featured examples from Oklahoma. My colleague Howard Markman and I have talked about what Oklahoma has accomplished in numerous countries around the world.)
One of the First Couples to Receive Help in the Oklahoma Project
(Scott at the British Museum)
But what about that goal of a 33% reduction in divorce?
• The OMI has a prestigious group of researchers who meet once a year to discuss studies, strategies, and give input.

• The Research Advisory Group first met in 2000.
  – The divorce reduction goal was one of the first things discussed. We knew it expressed an important goal about family stability.
  – While that goal was not something any state could achieve, in our view, implementing evidence-based services across multiple sectors was achievable.
  – The kinds of studies I will now describe are how researchers judge such efforts.
Two Points Before I Cover Studies on Relationship Education

Disclosure of Financial Interests

1) Scott Stanley, Howard Markman, and some of their colleagues earn income related to the sale of products and training related to PREP.

2) But also: note that adaptations of PREP have been studied by more independent research teams than any relationship education curricula in history.
Types of Studies

• Meta-analytic studies
  – Studies analyzing the results from many studies
  – There are numerous M-A studies out now
  – Many recent studies of this type have been conducted by Alan Hawkins and colleagues

• Influential Individual Studies

• Large Government Trials
Meta-Analyses of Couples Focused Relationship Education

- Meta-analyses examine impacts across a great many studies.

- Studies show consistently positive impacts on dimensions such as:
  - Relationship Satisfaction/Adjustment
  - Communication Quality

Individual Adult Focused RE

• The area of individually oriented relationship education is relatively new (Oklahoma led the way in innovations).
  – e.g., TANF classes
  – e.g., Correctional settings

• There are initial promising studies showing reductions on outcomes like domestic violence
  – but more rigorous evaluations await
    Antle, Sar, Christensen, Ellers, Karam, Barbee, & van zyl, (in press); Antle, Karam, Christensen, Barbee, & Sar (2011).
Teen Focused Relationship Education

• Helping individuals make sound choices so they can reach their life goals

• What’s different here from sex education? A whole lot, actually.

• Foundational premise:
  “Your love life is not neutral.”
  Marline Pearson, author of Relationship Smarts
Teen Focused Relationship Education

• Various studies show solid impacts (e.g.,):
  – Better resistance of sexual pressure
  – Improved conflict strategies with peers
  – Reduced physical and verbal aggression in peer and dating relationships
  – Reduced faulty relationship beliefs
  – Positive impacts across race, income, family structure, etc.

• Oklahoma leading the way: reaching 10,000 students a year with evidence-based RE
  e.g., Adler-Baeder, Kerpelman, Schramm, Higginbotham, & Paulk (2007); Kerpelman et al., (2010)
Oklahoma Been Rolling with Youth

- Reaching approximately 10,000 students a year
Summary Of Findings in this Field
(Mostly on Couple Focused Relationship Education)

- Impacts tend to be significant, but modest in size.
  - See the series of articles by Alan Hawkins and colleagues using meta-analytic techniques.

- People at higher risk tend to benefit the most.
  - Definitions of risk vary by study.

- Context: In the history of studies on government funded programs, significant effects are rare.
Curricula Used in Oklahoma: National Registries of Evidence-Based Programs

• **PREP** has various adaptations used throughout OK: It is listed in the U. S. Government’s SAMHSA National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices (NREPP).

• **Connections Relationships and Marriage** is used in over 85% of schools here. It is listed by the Department of Justice as Promising Practice.

• **Relationship Smarts** is also listed in NREPP, and an adaptation of it (**Love Notes**) is being piloted in OK with very, sexually active youth.
The Army Marriage Project (AMP)
The University of Denver

- The project described was supported by Award Number R01HD048780 from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health & Human Development (NIH).

- Investigators
  - Scott Stanley (University of Denver)
  - Elizabeth Allen (University of Colorado Denver)
  - Howard Markman (University of Denver)
  - Galena Rhoades (University of Denver)
The Army Marriage Project (AMP)

• 662 Army couples in two sites
  – 478 couples at Site 1 (main site)
  – 184 couples at Site 2

• Evaluation of PREP for Strong Bonds
  – Adaptation of PREP (Markman, Stanley, and many colleagues have developed PREP)

• RCT: Randomized Clinical Trial
  – All analyses used the most conservative analytic strategy (Intention to Treat Analyses)
Divorce: 1 Year Out

- Site 1: Significant Difference*
  
  **2% PREP for Strong Bonds** (5/246)
  **6% Control group** (14/226)

- Site 2: Too few divorces to meaningfully analyze (n = 4)

Self-Reported Relationship Quality Outcomes

• Significant pre to post differences on a number of dimensions of RQ, especially communication skills
  – Especially at Site 1; Allen et al., 2011

• Significant gains on relationship satisfaction to one year out for a higher risk group
  – Those with history of infidelity; Allen et al., 2012

• Two year RQ outcomes: Not significant e.g.,
  – Communication Skills
  – Positive Connections
  – Marital Satisfaction
I will now focus on Site 1 for further analyses of divorce

- Site 1 is much larger, and was the original core of the study (with services delivered in the most standard way, by unit chaplains).

- Site 1 is comprised of younger, lower ranking couples.

- Site 1 is comprised of a front-line, major combat force that was preparing for the surge during the intervention phase.

- Site 1 couples have twice the divorce risk of Site 2 couples (at 2 Years: 11 % vs. 5.5 %).
Divorce by 2 Years Out

• We know the divorce status at the two year point for all but 1 couple.

• Site 1: Significant Difference
  (Site 2: ns, and few divorces; n = 10)

  8.1 % PREP for Strong Bonds (20/248)
  14.9 % Control group (34/228)

• Divorce reduction moderated by . . .
  – Minority Status
  – Economic Strain (independent of minority status)
Site 1: % Divorced within 2 Years

- Control: 14.9%
- PREP SB: 8.1%
Army Study Site 1:
% Divorced at 2 yrs by Minority Status

The direction of this difference looks the same no matter how you break down minority vs. non-minority status.
These Results are Important

• Divorce reduction and couple stability impacts are rare in this field.

• We are about to send a paper describing these analyses for the two-year results out for review (so, the two year outcomes are not yet peer-reviewed).
Two Large Federal Studies Involving The Oklahoma DHS’s Family Expectations Program
Family Expectations

• Who is Family Expectations for?
  – Family Expectations is for couples expecting a new baby or who just had a baby.

• What does Family Expectations do?
  – Offers free workshops & activities where parents learn to
    • communicate better
    • manage conflict
    • establish a support network
    • care for their baby
What is really different here?

• A service like Family Expectations meets a new family as a family; not as parts and pieces of individuals with different specific needs to be served by different specific programs.

• That’s kind of a profoundly different thing.
Building Strong Families Study (BSF)

• Federally-funded study of services provided to unmarried couples with low income levels who are having a baby

• Evaluation team: Mathematica Policy Research Corp.

• 5102 couples across the 8 sites
Who Benefited Most from BSF? (15-month impacts)

• Across the 8 sites, program participation by couples was very poor (few got much of the intervention).

• Not surprisingly, across the 8 sites, results were generally not significant.
  – Critics of such programs focus on this “pooled” result.

• However, NOTE: Across the 8 sites, African American couples benefitted the most.
Oklahoma Shined: Family Expectations

Among 8 sites, only one BSF site had consistent, positive results at the 15-month follow-up:

– Couples receiving FE looked better, on average, on many relationship quality outcomes at 15 months

Oklahoma’s Family Expectations Program

– Strong methods, staff, and program
– Internationally recognized, DHS supported program noted for innovation
– Excellent couple participation
– Creative removal of barriers to participation
– Curriculum adaptation of PREP (Becoming Parents Program)
BSF 36-month Impacts

• This report just came out.

• As with the 15 month impacts, *across the 8 sites*, no overall significant impacts.

• Oklahoma, Family Expectations, again the exception:

• Significant differences on self-reported relationship quality no longer in evidence. **BUT**, a significant difference on the percent of families in each group where mother, father, and child lived together continuously until the child was three years old:

  *49% in BSF group vs. 41% in control group*
Note the Similarity of these results to the two-year Army outcomes

• Early relationship quality impacts

• Longer term relationship stability impacts

• Again, such stability impacts are rare and very noteworthy.
Consider That Finding for Oklahoma’s Family Expectations Program

- For every 1000 unmarried expecting couples who go through this high dose, high participation, engaging program...

  ... 80 vulnerable families are together at 3 years who otherwise would not have been.

This is a rare, important, long-term impact for a rigorous evaluation of a government program.
Supporting Healthy Marriage (SHM) Study

Large, federally-funded, multi-site randomized trial of relationship education and support services provided to married couples with low-income levels
SHM

• 6300 couples across 8 sites

• Low to modest incomes:
  – 82 % had incomes below 200% of the poverty threshold. (43% were below poverty line)

• Most participants are non-White

• Evaluators: MDRC and Abt & Associates
SHM Impacts: 12 Months

• There are overall statistically significant impacts on a range of variables reflecting positive program impacts.

• The impacts are small.
  • Keep in mind the context: Statistically significant impacts in rigorous government studies of various kinds of programs are uncommon.

• We will see what the future holds.
SHM: Quoting from the 12 Month Impact Report

- “Some evidence suggests that the positive estimated impacts of SHM are . . .
  . . . somewhat larger and more consistent for Hispanic couples
  and
  . . . for couples with high marital distress at study entry.”
SHM: Participation in Services

- 83% of couples attended at least one workshop
- 66% attended at least one supplemental activity
- 88% attended at least one family support meeting
- **On average, couples participated in 27 hours of intervention**
  - 17 curricula, 6 support activities, 4 family support meetings
- To quote Scott Stanley (we talk often):
  “This is incredible evidence of an ability to reach couples with low-income levels who are at higher risk and who almost never receive such services; many people have suggested that such couples are just not interested.”
Worth Special Note

• The BSF, SHM, and Army studies I just covered are the three largest completely randomized tests of programs including relationship education in history.

• In all three, there is evidence of positive impacts (except in BSF sites where participation was low).

• In all three, on average, minority couples tended to show evidence of receiving the greatest impact of all couples.
Tracking the Future
Clickity-Clack:
My Train of Thought on Policy Discussions

- **Trains**: The services and supports we may want to provide to couples and families

- **Tracks**: The systems for getting those services to those who need them
• We tend to focus on trains in policy discussions.

• Tracks matter more.

• If reliable tracks are sustained, you can keep refining trains to send down them.

• In some areas of the country, some truly impressive tracks have been built.

• Oklahoma set the pace and leads the way.
Links

• http://portfolio.du.edu/sstanley

• www.slidingvsdeciding.com

• www.PREPinc.com