THE SUPPORTING HEALTHY MARRIAGE EVALUATION

PERSPECTIVES OF LOW-INCOME AFRICAN-AMERICAN AND LATINO COUPLES ON RELATIONSHIP EDUCATION

Working Paper

Chrishana M. Lloyd
Ashley Weech
Jennifer Miller Gaubert

March 2014

Supporting Healthy Marriage

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BUILDING KNOWLEDGE TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY

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Abstract

The Supporting Healthy Marriage (SHM) study tested a voluntary, yearlong relationship and marriage education program targeting low-income married couples from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds who had children or were expecting a child. The evaluation is being led by MDRC, in collaboration with Abt Associates and other partners, and is sponsored by the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation in the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

This working paper presents findings from in-depth qualitative interviews with 16 married couples who participated in the SHM study in the Bronx, New York, and Reading, Pennsylvania. The aim of this research is to shed light on two understudied populations in the field of relationship education — African-American and Latino couples — and to illuminate the strengths, needs, and experiences of these groups as they participated in the program. The findings indicate that these couples expressed a clear interest in enrolling in SHM services. They responded positively to outreach methods and messaging, noting that the program content, diverse staff, and opportunity for time alone as a couple, as well as participation supports and incentives, attracted them to the program. Couples reported deriving a number of positive benefits from participating in the program, including spending time together, adopting a more positive view of their relationships, and learning new and positive ways of communicating that they actively tried out in their daily lives. At the same time, couples began the program with, and continued to face, numerous economic and resource needs. They also had few social supports, which placed significant stress on their relationships. In addition, couples did not show interest in developing social networks with other married couples as a way to help mitigate these stresses, although program designers anticipated at the outset that this could be an avenue for strengthened relationships. Indeed, many of these couples' needs persisted throughout their tenure in SHM, suggesting that additional supportive services may be helpful in addressing the nature and complexity of these issues. Finally, couples expressed an interest in more support on parenting, both in terms of navigating their roles as coparents and of learning strategies for addressing their children's needs at various stages.

The paper places these findings within the literature on economically challenged African-American and Latino families and the SHM theory of change. Considerations are offered for programs that provide relationship education or similar types of services.

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The Authors

Introduction

Relationship education programs have existed for several decades, and research on these programs suggests that psychoeducational interventions can be an effective way to improve couples' relationship quality. Such programs share several common characteristics and underlying theories of change. Many offer group workshops based on structured curricula and are facilitated by trained group leaders. In this setting, couples are taught skills to improve communication, manage conflict, and foster support and friendship. Improved relationship skills are hypothesized to lead to more positive interactions between partners, better teamwork, and in time, greater marital stability. In contrast to individual therapy, relationship education programs typically do not address specific couple problems, and to varying degrees, they emphasize the importance of learning from other participants in the group (Fincham and Beach, 2010; Knox and Fein, 2009).

Until recently, most relationship education programs have been developed, used, and tested with white, middle- and upper-class couples, and evaluations have found moderate positive effects on relationship quality and satisfaction (Knox and Fein, 2009). In the early 2000s, a number of rigorous research studies were launched to test whether this approach could be effective in improving the relationships of lower-income couples. These studies hypothesized that healthier couple relationships would in turn improve outcomes for their children, who would benefit from being raised in stable, low-conflict, two-parent households. Four random assignment studies were at the core of this effort. The Supporting Healthy Marriage (SHM) study tested a relationship education program that included group workshops, family support services, and supplemental activities, and targeted low-income married couples. The Building Strong Families evaluation tested a similar program for *unmarried* parents who had a newborn or were expecting a child (Wood et al., 2012). The Supporting Father Involvement intervention aimed to strengthen family functioning and fathers' involvement, and targeted predominantly low-income Mexican-American parents, regardless of their marital status (Cowan et al., 2009). The PREP for Strong Bonds intervention tested a relationship education curriculum delivered by Army chaplains to married military couples with low or modest incomes (Stanley et al., 2010).

These four studies have helped advance understanding of basic marital and family processes among low-income couples, and also present unique opportunities for learning how these interventions might help strengthen the relationships of low-income couples from different racial and ethnic backgrounds (Bradbury, Fincham, and Beach, 2000; Brotherson and Duncan, 2004; Fincham and Beach, 2010). To date, knowledge about marital interactions, cognitive processes in marriage, and expectations and values among married couples has been based primarily on data from a relatively narrow sampling of white, middle-class couples (Karney and Bradbury, 1995). Even as the challenges facing married African-American and Latino couples

are well documented, the quality, structure, and functioning of marital relationships among couples of color have received relatively little research attention (Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan, 1995; Landale and Oropesa, 2001; Ooms and Wilson, 2004).What we do know about these couples often comes from a "deficit perspective," which emphasizes "problems and pathology." Further, many of the studies have focused on unmarried individuals. Thus, there is a pressing need to better understand the strengths, needs, and experiences of these groups of couples in their own right (Marks et al., 2008).

This qualitative study, part of the SHM evaluation's implementation study, describes the experiences of low-income African-American and Latino married couples who participated in the SHM program, a rigorous, multisite evaluation of relationship education services designed for low-income married couples with children.[1] Based on in-depth qualitative interviews with16 African-American and Latino married couples, the study was not intended to capture a representative sample of these couples, but instead seeks to expand current literature about their marital experiences, their strengths, and the challenges they face. The findings will inform discussions about why African-American and Latino couples might seek out relationship education services, what their experiences of those programs are, what they learned and how they used that learning at home, and what barriers they faced to attending and applying the program's lessons to their own lives.

This paper begins by summarizing findings from the literature about marriage and low-income couples, in general, and about low-income, married African-American and Latino couples, more specifically. The context for the SHM evaluation follows, along with a description of the program services couples participated in and the ways in which the SHM research team and curriculum developers theorized that these activities would result in improvements in marital quality, marital stability, and, in the long term, child outcomes. The paper describes the design and goals of the in-depth couple interviews study, and then shares findings from this work. Lastly, discussion and insights, including considerations for future policies and programs, are offered.

The report finds that this sample of low-income married African-American and Latino couples demonstrated clear interest in enrolling in SHM services. They responded positively to outreach methods and messaging, noting that the program content, diverse staff, and the opportunity for time alone as a couple, as well as participation supports and incentives, attracted them

[1]The SHM evaluation is sponsored by the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The study is led by MDRC, a nonprofit social policy research organization, in collaboration with Abt Associates, Child Trends, Optimal Solutions Group, and Public Strategies as well as academic experts Thomas Bradbury, Philip Cowan, and Carolyn Pape Cowan. Additional background information on SHM and the study rationale can be found in Knox and Fein, 2009, and Miller Gaubert et al., 2010.

to the program. Couples reported deriving a number of positive benefits from participating, including spending time together as a couple; adopting a more positive view of their relationships; and learning new, positive ways of communicating that they actively tried out in their daily lives. At the same time, they began the program with, and continued to face, numerous economic and resource needs and a lack of social supports, all of which placed significant stress on their relationships. Resource needs were often complex, and programs were not able to help couples address them fully. Couples did not develop social networks with other married couples as a way to help mitigate these stresses in the way SHM developers and researchers anticipated, and some appeared to actively avoid developing close relationships with their peers. Lastly, given the central role that children and parenting played in their lives, couples expressed the wish that SHM had provided more support for parenting, both in terms of navigating their roles as coparents and learning strategies for addressing their children's needs at various stages.

Section 1

What Is Known About Marriage and Low-Income Couples?

Numerous studies have shown that low-income couples value the role of marriage in their lives, in society, and as a foundation for parenting. Despite differences in rates of marriage and divorce, marriage remains an important personal goal across racial and income groups. Lower-income couples hold standards for the romantic and emotional components of marriage that are similar to those of couples with higher incomes, and slightly higher standards in their economic expectations of marriage (Cherlin, 2004; Edin, 2000; Edin and Kefalas, 2005; Ooms and Wilson, 2004; Trail and Karney, 2012; Tucker, 2000; Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan, 1995). That marriage is held in similar esteem runs contrary to the commonly held notion that declining marriage rates, increased divorce rates, and the prevalence of one-parent families among lower-income populations are evidence of a cultural problem wherein those who live in poverty value marriage less than those with higher incomes (*Welfare and Marriage Issues*, 2001).

Lower marriage and higher divorce rates may, then, be attributable to other, noncultural explanations. A number of studies suggest that low-income couples face distinct challenges when it comes to getting and staying married. Some research suggests that the combination of unemployment, low wages, and poverty discourages family formation, erodes family stability, and makes it more likely that marriages will deteriorate (Coontz and Folbre, 2002; Ooms and Wilson, 2004; Seefeldt and Smock, 2004). Another study found that low-earning men are less likely to get married and more likely to divorce than men with higher earnings, and that the difficulty of staying married increases substantially with levels of economic disadvantage (Fein, 2004).

People who live in or near poverty, regardless of their race or cultural background, are far more likely to face challenges such as chronic shortage of money and debt accumulation; poor housing and unsafe neighborhoods; low levels of literacy; and high rates of unemployment, incarceration, substance abuse, depression, and domestic violence (Ooms and Wilson, 2004). Scholars have begun examining the many ways in which the stresses of living in poverty affect relationships and have found that major negative life events, chronic daily hassles, and family economic strain are associated with lower quality spousal interactions and lower warmth in marital interactions (Ooms, 2002; Ooms and Wilson, 2004; Seefeldt and Smock, 2004). This suggests that lower-income couples may find it particularly difficult to engage in the kinds of supportive and caring behaviors that research identifies as protective, helping couples to "weather the storm" together (Gottman and Notarius, 2000; Halford, Markman, Kling, and Stanley, 2003). In this light, low-income couples may be particularly receptive to relationship

education programs like SHM that teach skills in managing conflict, improving communication, managing environmental stressors, and helping couples decrease negative interactions and increase positive ones.

Section 2

What Is Known About Marriage Among African-American and Latino Couples?

In addition to the aforementioned challenges, low-income couples who are African-American or Latino experience other issues unique to their unions.[2] For example, for African-American women, 47 percent of first marriages end in separation or divorce within 10 years, a figure that is nearly 50 percent higher than the rate for non-Hispanic white women. And although Hispanic women experience dissolution of their marriages at lower rates than black non-Hispanic women, disadvantaged married couples are disproportionately Latino because Latinos are relatively more likely to both marry and stay married, as well as to be poor in the first place (Bramlett and Mosher, 2002; Fein, 2004).

Though marriage among African-American couples has been infrequently studied, several distinctive strengths and characteristics of their marriages have been identified in literature. These include a high degree of egalitarianism in gender roles, sharing and dividing household labor, involvement with extended family, and mutual self-disclosure (Hunter and Sellers, 1998; Kane, 1992; Marks et al., 2008; McAdoo, 1981; Oggins, Veroff, and Leber, 1993; Orbuch and Eyster, 1997). Faith is also cited as a source of strength for African-American couples (Marks et al., 2008). Because marriage rates among low-income African-American couples are lower than among other racial groups, it may be the case that low-income African-Americans who do choose to marry are especially committed to one another. Still, they may have a difficult time staying together because of numerous challenges in maintaining healthy, stable marriages. Some studies point to the adverse effects on personal relationships posed by living in the severely impoverished communities where many low-income African-Americans reside. In these neighborhoods, there tend to be few job opportunities or connections to other neighborhoods, resulting in limited prospects for creating economic security and few conventional role models of familial stability (Edin and Kefalas, 2005; Wilson, 1991-1992).

In addition to these neighborhood effects, several studies indicate that fewer than 33 percent of African-American wives perceive their marital partners as sources of emotional support, and African-American women tend to report lower levels of marital satisfaction than do African-American men (Brown and Gary, 1985; Bryant et al., 2008; Cutrona et al., 2003; Zollar and Williams, 1987). This is concerning in light of empirical evidence that demonstrates that the degree to which spouses provide support for their partners is associated with marital stability for

[2] In this paper we use the terms Hispanic and Latino interchangeably.

both African-American and white couples (Cutrona, 1996; Cutrona, Shaffer, Wesner, and Gardner, 2007). Moreover, lack of trust is also cited as a common marital challenge, a finding that may be linked to other research indicating that low-income African-American men report more relationship problems as a result of infidelity than do men of any other race, gender, or income subgroup (Bryant et al., 2008; Cutrona et al., 2003; Zollar and Williams, 1987).

Among Latino couples in the United States, traditional ideas regarding gender roles within marriage are often referred to as a source of conflict. However, some researchers suggest that while gender roles remain an important aspect of Latino culture, traditional conceptions of appropriate male and female behavior — *machismo* (male dominance and independence) and *marianismo* (female passivity and dependence) — do not accurately reflect family life today (Caldera, Fitzpatrick, and Wampler, 2002; Cauce and Domenech-Rodríguez, 2002; Guilamo-Ramos et al., 2007; Mirandé, 1997; Raffaelli and Ontai, 2004; Saracho and Spodek, 2007). Further, some scholars suggest that these roles can also be expressed as assets in couple relationships, for example, by encouraging men to provide for and protect their families, and women to play a stabilizing role in the home (Campos, 2008; Taylor and Behnke, 2005; Torres, Solberg, and Carlstrom, 2002). Other features of Latino culture identified in the literature — *familismo*, *educación*, and *respeto* — can also be protective factors in couple relationships. In brief, *famil-ismo* places value on family cohesion, interdependence, loyalty, and obligation (Cauce and Domenech-Rodríguez, 2002). *Educación* refers to both parents working to raise children to be moral, responsible, and successful in personal relationships. (Halgunseth, Ispa, and Rudy, 2006; Valenzuela, 1999). *Respeto* is respect, including respect for traditions, family, and the specific roles of different individuals within the family (Halgunseth, Ipsa, and Rudy, 2006; Valdés, 1996).

The level of conflict between Latino husbands and wives about gender roles and other topics may also depend on their level of acculturation. Some research suggests that more acculturated husbands and wives express their conflicts in more open, direct ways than couples who have recently immigrated, which, in terms of relationship quality, could mean better, more productive communication, or could simply mean more conflict (Flores, Tschann, Marin, and Pantoja, 2004). It also seems likely that different levels of acculturation or traditionalism between spouses may lead to conflict. Notably, male infidelity in Latino marriages is cited as a common occurrence (Estación and Cherlin, 2010; Trail and Karney, 2012). Some scholars of Latino family life have surmised that Latina women who hold traditional cultural views of the man's role primarily as provider may have fewer expectations of fidelity and thus be less likely to address infidelity directly. This may not be the case for Latina women who do not subscribe

to such traditional values and who may be more Americanized.[3] Importantly, research that focuses on the experiences of Latino couples in the United States tends to report on smaller, ethnically homogeneous samples of participants, for example, qualitative studies on particular groups like Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, or Mexicans.

These findings help to form the initial contours of the experiences of many African-American and Latino couples in their marriages, and yet, many questions remain. For example, what do these couples view as the strengths and sources of support in their marriages? How do they define the challenges they face in their couple relationship, and how do they manage them? What influences their decision-making on whether to stay together or to separate? Why might low-income African-American and Latino couples seek out relationship education services, and what expectations do they have? These questions form the motivation for the SHM study's in-depth couple interviews.

[3]The notion of Americanization is also discussed in an ACF Working Paper based on notes from expert participants from the Supporting Healthy Marriage and Hispanic Healthy Marriage Initiative Joint Research Meeting held on September 12-13, 2005, in Washington, DC, and a research meeting held in conjunction with the Hispanic Healthy Marriage National Conference May 11, 2006, in San Antonio, Texas. Available on ACF's Web site: http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org.

Section 3

The Supporting Healthy Marriage Evaluation: Context and Program Design

The SHM evaluation, sponsored by the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation in the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, was launched in 2003 by MDRC and its partners. SHM uses a rigorous, random assignment research design to test the effectiveness of a relationship education program that sought to help low-income married couples strengthen their relationships and, in turn, support more stable and nurturing home environments and more positive outcomes for parents and their children. In eight locations across the United States, SHM evaluated a voluntary, yearlong program for couples who, at study entry, had children or were expecting a child.[4] The SHM model was comprised of three complementary components:

- **Relationship and marriage education workshops.** The program's central and most intensive component — workshops — were designed to help couples enhance the quality of their relationships by teaching strategies for managing conflict, communicating effectively, increasing supportive behaviors, and building closeness and friendship. Workshops also wove in strategies for managing stressful circumstances commonly faced by lower-income families, such as job loss or financial stress, and encouraged couples to build positive support networks in their communities. Local programs selected one of four curricula that had been used with middle-income couples and were adapted for SHM.[5] Couples were offered between 24 and 30 hours of curriculum over a 6- to 15-week period.

- **Supplemental activities.** Complementing the workshops, supplemental activities were educational and social events intended to build on and reinforce lessons from the workshops. These events provided couples additional op-

[4]The eight programs selected to participate in the SHM evaluation are located in Orlando, Florida; Wichita, Kansas; the Bronx, New York; Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; Bethlehem and Reading, Pennsylvania; El Paso and San Antonio, Texas; and Seattle and Shoreline, Washington. The Pennsylvania and Texas programs offered services in two locations. In the implementation and impact analysis, these programs are each considered one site, and research samples from both locations are combined. This paper discusses Reading, one of the two program locations in Pennsylvania.

[5]Local programs used one of four curricula adapted for use in SHM: Within Our Reach (WOR); For Our Family, For Our Future (FOF); Loving Couples Loving Children (LCLC); and the Becoming Parents Program (BPP).

portunities to learn and practice relationship skills and to build support networks with other married couples. Couples could participate in supplemental activities up to one year following their enrollment in the program.

- **Family support services.** The third component, family support services, paired couples with a specialized staff member who served as the main link between couples and the program. Family support workers maintained contact and facilitated couples' participation in the other two program components, in part by helping connect participants to community services as a way to address barriers to participation. To differing degrees, staff also reinforced the workshop themes and skills in one-on-one meetings with couples.

As shown in Figure 1, the SHM research team and the relationship education program developers theorized that the combination of SHM services would work by strengthening the quality of couples' interactions as they learned skills for improving communication and managing conflict. Couples would talk more easily about difficult topics and be more likely to work as a team to address whatever challenges they faced. They would be more supportive and understanding of one another and less negative and critical. As the quality of their day-to-day interactions improved, couples would begin to think and feel more positively about their relationships, improving their overall outlook on their marriage as well as their individual psychological well-being. In turn, these improvements would result in greater marital stability. Parents would also feel better able to coparent their children and work as a team, thereby strengthening parent-child interactions.

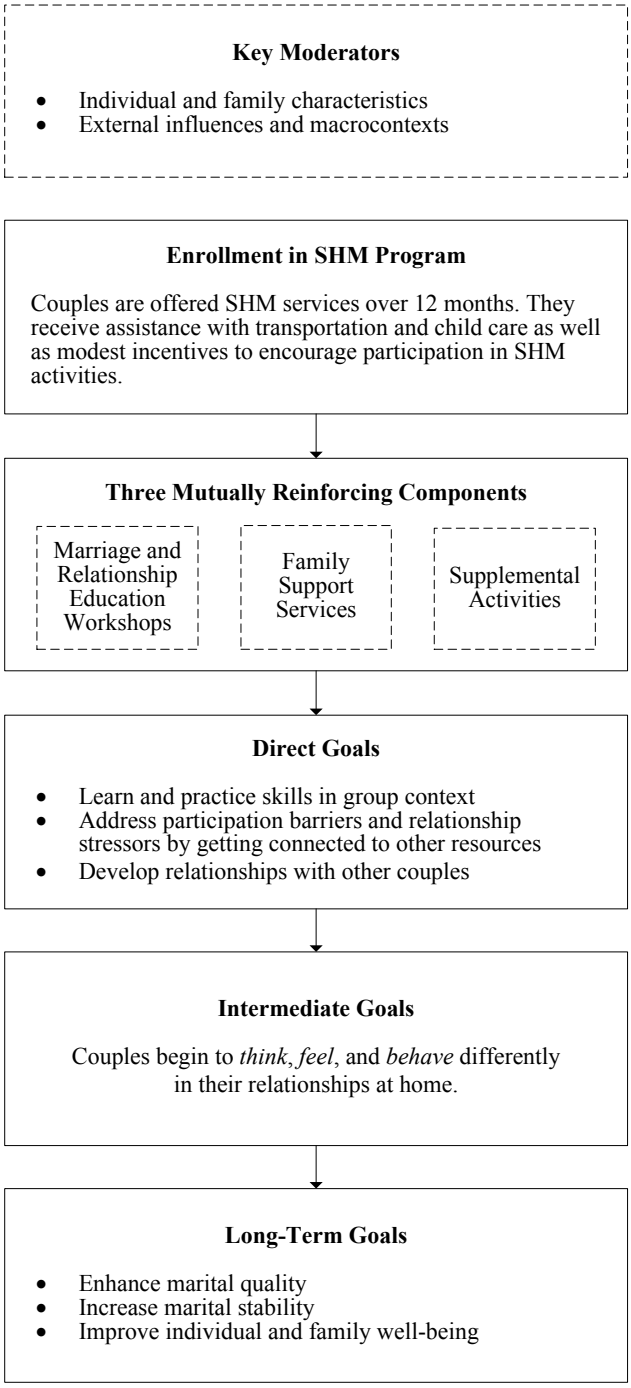
The curriculum used in the Reading, Pennsylvania, program was Within Our Reach (WOR). WOR takes a cognitive-behavioral approach to relationship and marriage education, with the goal of helping couples modify behavior to reduce and better manage negative moods and emotions.[6] The curriculum used in the Bronx was Loving Couples Loving Children (LCLC). LCLC is organized around the concept that the underpinning of a healthy relationship is a strong friendship, as indicated by positive emotions shared in nonconflictual

[6]Central to WOR's approach is its focus on different types of safety: safety in interaction (ability to talk openly about issues), personal safety (freedom from fear of harm), and safety in commitment (mutual support, teamwork, and a clear future together). The two central activities are speaker-listener technique (giving your partner the floor to speak without interrupting, then speaking back to your spouse paraphrasing what he or she has said) and X,Y,Z statements (when you do X, I feel Y, and I need you to do Z in the future). For more information, see: http://www.prepinc.com or Stanley and Markman, 2008.

The Supporting Healthy Marriage Evaluation

Figure 1

SHM Theory of Change



interactions.[7] While experts in the field were consulted about whether the curricula would be relevant to a diverse group of low-income couples, and adaptations to the content were made accordingly, neither of the curricula were tailored to address cultural issues specific to African-American or Latino couples. This was in large part because developers expected that topics like communication and conflict management — core foci of the curricula — were relevant to a broad range of audiences, irrespective of their racial or ethnic background. Some individual facilitators, however, adapted the examples they used or other aspects of the workshop depending on the composition of the groups.

Success of the program was thought to be contingent on couples participating consistently in services, and SHM offered services over a 12-month period, hoping that ongoing contact with the program might yield longer-term positive effects for couples. Local programs provided assistance to defray transportation and child care costs couples incurred while attending the program. In addition, modest emergency assistance helped with extraordinary circumstances like overdue utilities, and small incentives were offered to encourage and reward participation, such as gift certificates to local stores, baby items, or family games to take home and play with the couples' children.[8]

At the outset of the SHM evaluation, the primary questions were whether low-income couples would be interested enough in this type of program to enroll, and whether services would be attractive enough to keep them coming over time. The programs succeeded in enrolling 6,298 couples, half of whom received program services and half of whom were assigned to the control group. Among program group couples, 91 percent attended at least one of the three offered SHM activities. Those who came once went on to complete an average of 29 hours of SHM programming over a 12-month period (Miller et al., 2010).

The study's impact analysis sought to (1) determine the extent to which the program improved the quality and stability of marriages as well as other aspects of family functioning and adult and child well-being; and (2) understand who is more likely or less likely to benefit from the program. The 12-month impact results show a consistent, sustained pattern of small but positive effects on several outcomes, including higher levels of marital happiness and lower

[7]LCLC proposes a four-part process for problem-solving that includes gentle start-up of challenging conversations, accepting the validity of multiple perspectives, and becoming skilled at repair-and-recovery conversations and at compromise. Couples are encouraged to share hopes for themselves and their marriage and to explore the personal experiences that shape their beliefs and expectations. By discovering and validating each spouse's hopes and dreams, the couple can reduce damaging interactions related to recurring problems and can build a sense of shared meaning and identity as a couple. For more information, see Loving Couples Loving Children, 2009.

[8]Participation supports and incentives are described in detail in Miller Gaubert, Gubits, Alderson, and Knox, 2012.

levels of marital distress, increases in warm and supportive behaviors and positive communication skills, and fewer negative emotions and behaviors in couples' interactions with each other. SHM also decreased adult psychological distress, reports of psychological abuse, and the percentage of men reporting that they had been physically assaulted by their partners. By the 30-month follow-up point, for the most part, the impacts on indicators of marital quality and adult psychological well-being were sustained. These impacts, however, did not translate into significant impacts on marital stability as hypothesized. Nor did they translate into substantial impacts on coparenting, parenting, or outcomes for children aged 2 to 17 years old.[9]

[9]For more information on the SHM impact findings, see Hsueh et al., 2012, and Lundquist et al., 2014, in press.

Section 4

In-Depth Couple Interviews: Study Design

The SHM in-depth couple interview study was aimed at understanding couples' perspectives in the two program locations likely to yield the highest number of African-American and Latino couples: the Bronx, New York, and Reading, Pennsylvania. These sites were geographically accessible to the research team in New York City, allowing the researchers not only to interact with couples multiple times, but also to observe their active participation in the SHM relationship and marriage education groups over the course of the study.

Researchers worked closely with program staff to recruit participants into the study. Interviews began in October 2009 and were conducted with 16 couples (8 at each of the two programs). Couples at each site were part of the same relationship education workshop group, and interviews were conducted at three points in time: Round A, at the beginning of the workshop with both members of each couple together; Round B, at the end of the workshop with each member of the couples separately; and Round C, approximately two months after the workshop ended with couples together again. Topics covered in each round are outlined in Table 1. Respondents received a nominal cash stipend for their participation at each round of interviews.

Interviews took place both in couples' homes and at the program sites. Interviewers made a concerted effort to complete at least one interview in the couples' residence to make it more convenient for couples to participate and to give researchers a better understanding of couples' home life.[10] Approximately half of the interviews were conducted in Spanish due to the heavy presence of Spanish-speaking Latino immigrants at one of the sites.

Researchers attended workshops before each round of interviews to observe couples during their program participation. Interviews were conducted by pairs of researchers (one male and one female), at least one of whom was clinically trained.[11] Each interview team followed up with the same respondents during each interview round, and for the individual interviews, researchers were matched with respondents of the same race or ethnicity and gender.

When meeting respondents for each round of interviews, a "priming" conversation occurred before the formal interview in order to understand couple dynamics and to better identify

[10] At least one round of interviews was conducted in 14 out of 16 couples' current residences.

[11] Interviewers with clinical backgrounds were selected in part because the team wanted people who would be skilled at encouraging couples to share detailed and descriptive information and in part because of the personal nature of the information that couples were likely to share (for example, substance use, mental health, or infidelity).

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Table 1

Content Covered in In-Depth Qualitative Interviews

Interview Round	
A	Initial meeting, courtship, decision to get married and have children, changes in relationship over time Parenting, dealings with parents of children from previous relationships Daily activities of their family lives Sources of support (personal or organizational) Communication styles, strategies for coping with challenges, joint couple activities What led them to the program, expectations, initial impressions of the program
B	Relationship role models, previous romantic relationships, decision-making process around marriage Approach to parenting both residential and nonresidential children Experiences in program, topics discussed at home, aspects of program they found most beneficial Views on the strengths and challenges of their current relationship
C	Parenting practices and challenges Sources of support (personal or organizational) Communication styles, strategies for coping with challenges, joint couple activities Use of program content, perceptions of the program, what they had gotten out of participating Perceived changes in couple, parent-child, familial, peer, and work relationships since start of program

NOTE: There was intentional overlap between topics covered in Round A and C to assess change over time.

some of the issues that would be addressed in the interview.[12] After the initial information gathering, SHM researchers used a set of open-ended questions to guide their interviews and asked clarifying and follow-up questions as needed. Table 1 shows the topics covered in each round of interviews.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Spanish-language interviews were transcribed in Spanish; the transcriptions were reviewed and checked for accuracy by a native Spanish speaker and then translated into English. Interview analysis began with a full team meeting to discuss general impressions of the data. All interviews were read, entered into an NVivo data analysis software database, and coded line by line by three members of the research team, one of whom was considered the master coder. All codes were reviewed by a senior researcher, and 20 percent of interviews were double-coded. Consensus coding was used when points of disagreement occurred. The SHM team conducted regular debriefings throughout the research process with the research team and the program staff — including administrators, facilitators, and family support workers — to check in about and share the findings, a strategy designed to help to triangulate the data and increase the rigor of the analysis process (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

[12]The "priming" conversation is a technique developed by coauthor Chrishana M. Lloyd. It is a "break the ice" dialogue that occurs before the qualitative interview begins, which allows interviewees the opportunity to begin thinking about interview topics. The goal is to help participants better recall insights relevant to the interview questions. In addition, interviewers may gain valuable perspectives about participants and areas of inquiry that might benefit from more or less intense probing.

Section 5

Demographic Characteristics of Couples Participating in the Interviews

For this study, interviews were conducted with 16 couples participating in SHM programs in Reading, Pennsylvania,[13] and the Bronx, New York[14] — programs, which in comparison with other SHM sites, served greater numbers of Latino and African-American couples, respectively. The individuals who participated in the interviews were predominately Latino (75 percent), with African-American couples, all in the Bronx, making up a smaller portion of the sample (22 percent).[15] In Reading, each individual clearly identified a single place of origin that matched that of his or her spouse. The Reading couples had immigrated to the United States more recently than Latino couples in the Bronx. In the Bronx, Latino individuals often identified multiple places of origin, such as Puerto Rico, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic; one African-American individual self-identified as Caribbean during the interviews. In three couples in the Bronx, the individuals reported having different racial or ethnic backgrounds.[16] Couples reported varying levels of acculturation and diverse experiences living in the United States.

As shown in Table 2, for just over half of the couples (56 percent), both spouses had a high school degree or a General Educational Development certificate (GED). In Reading, couples had between three and four residential children, whereas in the Bronx they had between one and two, on average. While in 81 percent of the couples, one spouse reported being

[13]The Reading, Pennsylvania, Strong Families (Familias Estables) program was operated by Community Prevention Partnership (CCP), a social service organization offering an array of preventive health programs for children, youth, and families. CCP has extensive experience with home-based case management services and Latino populations. Couples in this program were largely Latino; 86 percent of couples were born outside the United States. Thus, SHM at this site was conducted exclusively in Spanish. Couples at this program site had lower incomes and the lowest levels of education compared to couples at other SHM sites. Staff had social work or clinical backgrounds, and many were bilingual and bicultural. This program used the Within Our Reach curriculum

[14]The Bronx, New York, program was offered at University Behavioral Associates, a subsidiary of Montefiore Medical Center, a large provider of behavioral health services in the area. This SHM program served the largest population of African-American couples of any SHM program, and couples at this program site faced substance use issues at a rate higher than the rest of the SHM population. This site used the Loving Couples curriculum and was the only program where most workshop facilitators were doctorate-level clinical psychologists.

[15]Of 32 individuals, 24 individuals identified as Latino, one identified as white Puerto Rican, and 7 identified as African-American. One individual in the sample did not report his or her race/ethnicity, but in interviews shared that he or she was from Mexico.

[16]These couples are, for the most part Latinos who come from different countries of origin.

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Table 2

Demographic Characteristics of Couples Participating in Qualitative Interviews by Local Program

Characteristic	Reading	The Bronx
Socioeconomic characteristics		
Average age (years)	32.9	34.8
Women	31.6	35.0
Men	34.3	34.6
Race and ethnicity (number of individuals)		
African-American - not Latino	0.0	7.0
African-American - Puerto Rican	0.0	2.0
White - Puerto Rican	0.0	1.0
Latino - Puerto Rican	4.0	2.0
Latino - Dominican	8.0	0.0
Latino - Mexican/Mexican-American/Chicano	3.0	0.0
Latino - Multiple selected	0.0	3.0
Latino - Other	0.0	1.0
Same racial/ethnic background (number of couples)	7.0	5.0
Different racial/ethnic background (number of couples)[a]	0.0	3.0
Has at least a high school diploma or GED (number of individuals)	7.0	11.0
Unemployed (number of individuals)	4.0	10.0
Women	3.0	4.0
Men	1.0	6.0
Family characteristics		
Average number of residential children	3.5	1.9
Has nonresidential children (number of individuals)[b]	1.0	2.0
Married (number of couples)[c]	7.0	4.0
In a committed relationship (number of couples)	1.0	4.0
Average number of years together	12.4	5.9
Sample size (individuals)	16.0	16.0
Sample size (couples)	8.0	8.0

SOURCE: Data from priming questionnaires at Round A and B.

NOTES: Data was collected at two points in time, both before the end of the SHM program. Some marital and employment statuses changed throughout the course of the interviews.

[a]In Reading, PA one participant did identify his or her racial or ethnic background. In the Bronx, NY these couples are, for the most part, Latinos with different countires of origin.

[b]All three individuals who reported having nonresidential children are male. Reading father has 5 biological, nonresidential children. In the Bronx, one father has 2 biological, nonresidential children; the other has 3 nonresidential children that he categorized as "other" (not adopted or biological to either spouse).

[c]Programs placed different levels of emphasis on couples needing to be formally married to participate in SHM. Many couples who did not have U.S. state-issued marriage licenses did identify as married. Determination of marital status for this study occurred by asking couples a series of sequential questions: “How long have you been together?” and “Are you married? If yes, for how long?”

employed full or part time or "as needed," only a little more than half of the individuals in the sample were employed. The average age of individuals was 34. Couples described a long-standing commitment to one another and had been together an average of nine years.[17] And yet, couples reported that when they came to SHM, the quality of their relationship was lower than what they hoped for. In the interviews, some spoke about the immediate possibility of ending their relationship, and the large majority of women stated that they viewed attending SHM as the last opportunity to find new strategies to keep the marriage together.[18] Many couples reported relational issues consistent with those cited in current literature on low-income African-American and Latino couples noted earlier in this paper, including infidelity, jealousy, and varying expectations and conflict regarding the enactment of gender roles. As theorized when the program was being developed, common relational issues like communication and conflict management challenged the couples and shaped their reactions and responses to the SHM program's content.

[17]Programs placed different levels of emphasis on couples needing to be formally married to participate in SHM. Many couples who did not have U.S. state-issued marriage licenses did identify as married. Determination of marital status for this study occurred by asking couples a series of sequential questions: "How long have you been together?" and "Are you married? If yes, for how long?"

[18]See Theme 4 for more on this topic.

Section 6

Findings

This section synthesizes data from three rounds of interviews, highlighting the six most salient themes articulated by couples and individuals. Figure 2 shows these findings alongside the theory of change hypotheses, illustrating how the findings aligned with or diverged from anticipated outcomes.

Theme 1: Couples Demonstrated Clear Interest in Participation and Consistent Engagement in the Program

An open question at the outset of the demonstration was whether low-income couples would enroll and participate in a voluntary program like SHM. The study's implementation and impact reports concluded that couples were indeed interested and that it is possible to recruit a diverse range of couples and keep them engaged in services.[19] These in-depth interviews shed light on *why* a select group of African-American and Latino couples came to the SHM program. Couples indicated that recruitment efforts were successful for a number of reasons including:

- **Recruitment sites:** Recruitment took place primarily at social service agencies and community organizations, which often meant that women were the first member of the couple to hear about the program. This is notable since many women said that they viewed enrolling in SHM as a last-ditch effort to salvage their relationships; thus they may have been particularly receptive to an offer of these kinds of services.

- **Program content and messaging:** Programs used a wide range of marketing messages and media to appeal to both men and women. In interviews, women reported being attracted to the idea of a program in which they could learn to improve their relationships and family life and perhaps "save" their marriages. Once women decided they were interested, they (with help from male program staff), encouraged their husbands to enroll. Interestingly, men reported being more attracted by the potential benefits of the program for their children rather than the marriage itself, a finding that is consistent with

[19]For more information, see Hsueh et al., 2012, Miller Gaubert et al., 2012, and the forthcoming final impact report, Lundquist et al., 2014, in press.

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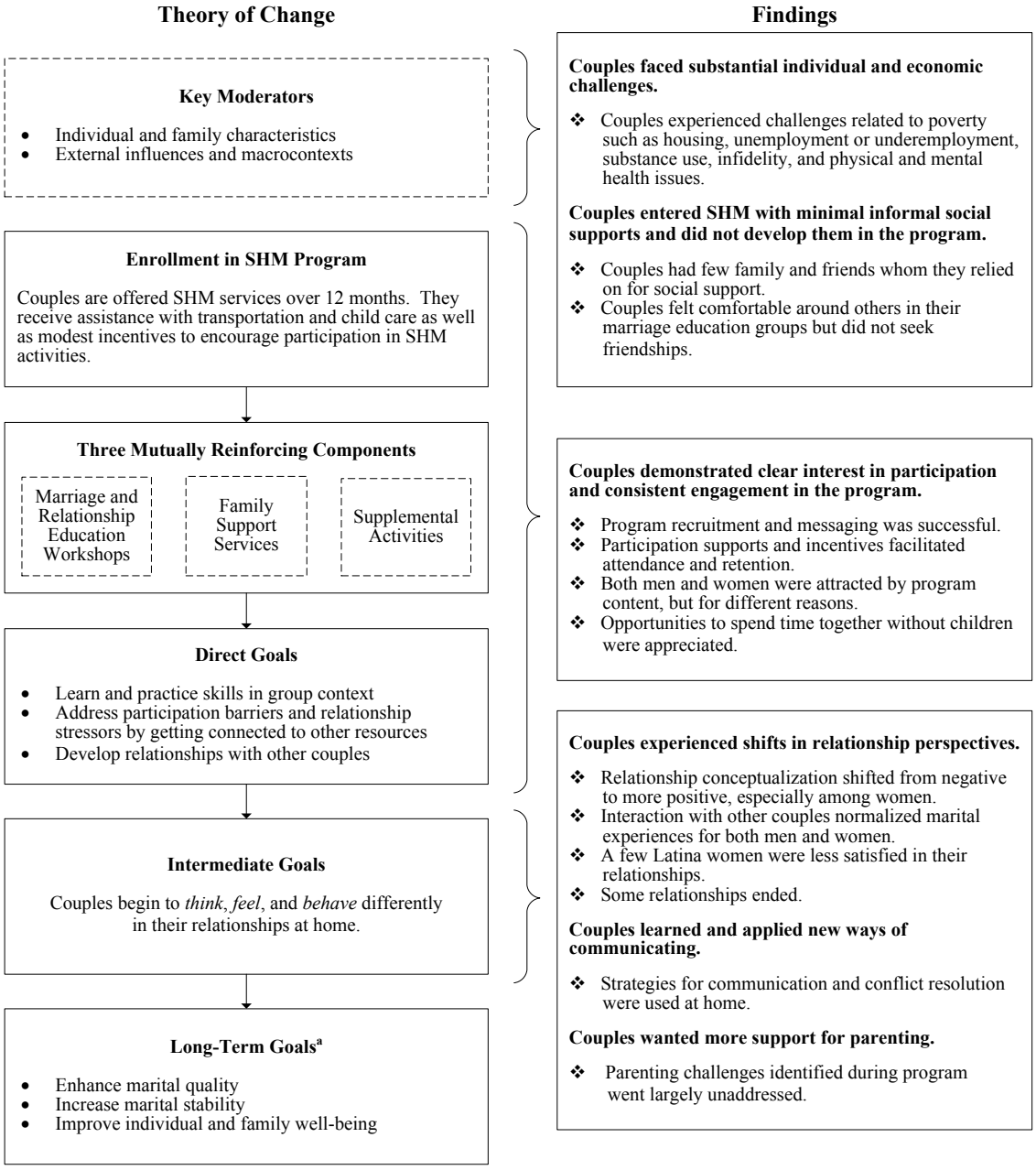
Figure 2

SHM Theory of Change and Individual and Couple Findings from In-Depth Qualitative Interviews



NOTE:
[a]Interviews ended approximately two months after the marriage education groups ended, which did not enable the research team to understand whether couples realized the long-term goals of the SHM program.

other research (Edin and Nelson, 2013; Townsend, 2002). In this group of couples, then, marriage-focused content attracted women to SHM, and the potential benefits for children attracted men.

- **Participation supports and incentives:** SHM's offer of assistance with transportation and child care, along with modest incentives, also influenced couples' decisions to enroll. Incentives at the two sites varied, with the Bronx offering among the most generous incentives among all SHM programs, and Reading the most modest. But in both locations, couples spoke of the importance of the incentives in their decision to enroll in the program. In addition to the incentives, couples in Reading may have also been attracted to SHM because the program gave them access to other services at the host agency, which was especially important given the limited services for recent immigrants in that community.

Once couples enrolled, programs aimed to encourage consistent participation over time, a particular challenge when offering voluntary services. For these 16 couples, in spite of the many logistical and economic difficulties they faced, participation was remarkably consistent. In the interviews, couples identified several factors that supported their attendance:

- **Program content**. While couples expressed a desire for more parenting content in the workshops (a finding explored in more detail in Theme 6), in general, couples reported that the curriculum topics were relevant and that they enjoyed learning how to apply the workshops' content in their lives. Topics like communication and conflict resolution resonated across the board with both African-American and Latino couples in this study. Couples also made concerted efforts to practice what they learned, a telling indicator that they had bought into the content of the curriculum.

- **Program staff.** In general, couples were satisfied with the type and quality of the staff in both SHM programs. Their strongest connections seemed to be with the workshop facilitators, whom they tended to view as the most important part of the program. SHM programs intentionally hired male employees as a way of making the programs more attractive to men. Data from these couples indicate that this was an important and successful approach, with men reporting satisfaction that programs had staff members who were able to understand and represent their point of view.

- **Participation supports and incentives.** Participation supports, like transportation assistance, meals during workshops, child care, and emergency assistance, played a key role in encouraging couples to continue to attend.[20] In particular, couples cited on-site child care or reimbursement for the cost of babysitting as being most useful, since limited access to care and the associated costs were barriers to spending time together as a couple without their children. As the quote below illustrates, program supports were appreciated considerably and were a necessary prerequisite for attendance.

- **Spending time together as a couple.** Couples enjoyed having uninterrupted time together, often referring to their attendance at the program as a "date night." It seems that participation offered couples a rare and much needed respite. One wife described it by saying, "…it gave us some time together...away from the children, no kids allowed — I was like woo hoo [laughter]."

One common challenge to couples' participation in SHM was the incidence of changes in employment status during the course of the program. Some individuals experienced difficulty attending SHM after finding a new job or when work hours changed. Couples affected by these changes saw enough benefit in the program that the nonworking partners continued to attend alone, but attendees also noted that this made it difficult to use the skills with their spouses, since they had not been exposed to the workshop content. This issue is highly representative of the unpredictable and ever-changing nature of work patterns for those living in poverty (Acs and Loprest, November 2008).

In sum, we learned that these low-income African-American and Latino couples — both men and women — attributed their enrollment and consistent attendance at the SHM program to the relevance of the content and messaging to their lives, and to participation supports and incentives, an aspect of the SHM model specifically designed to address potential barriers to participation.

[20]In the Bronx, couples received assistance with transportation costs and reimbursements for child care for most activities. Raffle tickets were offered for attendance at marriage education workshops. Child care was considered the greatest incentive by both the couples and the program. In Reading, couples received assistance with transportation costs, and child care was provided on site. Incentives were offered for attendance at workshops. The amount of money spent on supports and incentives for attendance at workshops in Reading was lower than in the other participating programs. For more information see Miller Gaubert et al., 2012.

Theme 2: Couples Faced Substantial Individual and Economic Challenges

The large majority of couples in this study reported facing the types of problems that research links to poverty (summarized earlier in this paper), such as substandard or unstable housing, unemployment or underemployment, substance use and abuse, infidelity, and physical and mental health issues. Dealing with multiple, complex issues was a common experience. A typical example of this was embodied by Christopher and Camille,[21] an African-American couple from the Bronx living in a homeless shelter. Their lives leading up to and during the interview process were complicated. Neither Christopher nor Camille had had consistent employment for several years. Christopher, who had a history of incarceration, helped to provide for his family by working in the underground economy, as he described:

> I try to provide for my family as much as I can. You know? I'm a go-getter. Right now, I'm not working, but you know, I got my little hustles, you know, to try and make money in the house. Nothing…nothing that'll put me behind bars....I always try to do the best for my family.…

Camille, who reported depression and anxiety as well as physical health concerns, confided that she thought her husband had some type of undiagnosed mental health problem. The family consisted of biological children that the couple had in common, as well as children from previous relationships. Both of them explained that valuing family, particularly the children, was what helped keep them committed to the relationship. The couple also talked about infidelity, a reduction in physical intimacy, and a lack of financial resources. They disagreed often, and both spouses cited lack of communication and conflicts related to parenting as important issues for them.

SHM's developers anticipated that low-income couples would face such challenges; thus part of the family support workers' responsibility was to provide information and referrals to appropriate services in the community. Some sites had more robust approaches than others, often depending on the type of host agency. For example, programs located in long-standing or multiservice agencies were able to capitalize on internal resources or build on well-established linkages with local service providers. However, the level and complexity of couples' needs often exceeded the help SHM programs could provide, and most couples participating in the interviews left the SHM program with these needs largely unmet.

Despite the many difficulties they faced, couples reported valuing their relationships and wanting them to endure. Christopher, the husband described above, said, "We're still learning and we're still growing with each other....You know? We're in it for the long haul." Of her

[21] Participants' names have been changed.

commitment to the relationship, the wife in another couple shared, "We both wanna be together for a long time." Her husband concurred stating, "I think that's what drives us — that we both really wanna be with each other."

Theme 3: Couples Entered SHM with Minimal Social Supports and Did Not Develop Them in the Program

Networks of friends and family were theorized to be an important resource for couples to rely on in times of need, particularly for those with few financial resources. Participants in the interviews reported entering the study with few such social supports. According to their interviews, while many couples received emotional and material support from family members, few counted on friends for the kind of support that would help them through truly difficult times. Language like "us against the world" was used to convey the idea that couples preferred to rely primarily on each other. This was a somewhat surprising finding.

The SHM program included both group workshops and supplemental activities in part because developers believed both would be mechanisms for making and solidifying social connections with other couples. While couples reported that they enjoyed these activities and felt comfortable around their group members, they did not view them as a network of support during or after the program. One woman stated:

> The group was nice just to hear everybody else's story....We interacted with some of the other couples but...we're just gonna chill and do what we do because it works good.…We got this bubble around our family and that's all that exists.

Most often, women were the ones who were actively against developing relationships with other couples in the workshops. For example, when Donna and Jerome, a couple in the Bronx, were asked whether they associated with couples who were married or had been together for a long time like those in the workshops, Jerome responded, "We are pretty much loners." The interviewer asked Jerome to expand on this topic and he continued, "…it's just us. Us and the kids. That's it." Later in the interview, he went on to say:

> I'm a gregarious person, I'm very social. She's very sociable too and we're very outgoing, [but] we haven't really met any couples that we want to be engaged with, because, well, I don't know why.…

Donna, however, was crystal clear about why those connections had not formed. Even though her husband told the interview team later that it might have been nice to build connections with others, Donna's brief but heartfelt take on the subject was, "I don't like to be close with people." Several women participants articulated this intentional strategy of keeping people

at a distance, a tactic they used before they began participating in SHM. In some cases, couples explained that other people have the potential to be judgmental and negative, particularly if they are jealous, or as Christopher in the Bronx put it, "miserable" in their own lives. Abrianna, a wife from another couple in the Bronx, described one of her "friends" as a "hater," meaning that her friend did not have Abrianna's best interests at heart and was envious of her relationship with her husband. While couples did not outright avoid interacting with others, they did deliberately create social distance, ensuring that relationships remained shallow.

It seems, then, that couples perceived forging close connections outside of their circles of kin — in this case, with couples in the program who were experiencing difficulties on par with or perhaps even more entrenched than their own — as a potential risk, one that could have a negative impact on their own marital relationships. Even so, program attendance was remarkably consistent, and couples' perspectives on their marital relationship began to change as they participated in the program. We explore this theme in the section below.

Theme 4: Couples Experienced Shifts in Relationship Perspectives

A salient theme that emerged from the interviews was how couples' views of their relationships shifted. Even while still articulating an overwhelming number of issues they needed to work on, couples reported seeing their relationships in a more positive light because of their participation in SHM. By watching and listening to others in the workshops, they learned that other participants struggled with similar problems. For these couples, who did not have role models of healthy relationships and did not spend much social time with other married couples, hearing from their peers in the workshops provided them with points of relationship comparison. In this way, SHM normalized their own marital challenges, such as struggles with communication or disagreements about parenting. Some couples noted that this freed them from the notion that marriage should not involve conflict and strengthened their resolve to work on problems in their own marriage. Interestingly, no couple thought that they were at the bottom of the pack in terms of relationship challenges, often articulating that they were better off than the others. Shauna, in the Bronx, said:

> …the first thing you see is that you think you're the only one going through this.…you think you're the only one with this problem. And when you come and see everyone in the room has the same problem. But they're…doing it differently. Each person is going about it a different way. You see yourself in their shoes, but you wouldn't think the way they do.…I noticed that other people are more worser....'Cause frankly, things that couples said there, Lord have mercy! I thought I was bad. I have nothing, compared to what they [experience]...hmmm!

This was particularly true of women, many of whom entered the program reporting that they were on the verge of wanting to separate from their husbands. Watching and hearing about how other relationships did and did not work served as a catalyst in helping them adopt a more positive view of their own relationships. As a result, women began to recognize and value their husbands' behaviors both before and during their participation in SHM and "eased up" on their criticisms of them. Janisa, a Latina woman in the Bronx, described positive changes in her relationship, saying:

> It changed...The whole thing. It's like he was out of the boat; [then] he got inside the boat.…He's here…moving around in the boat.…which that's what [before SHM] I really was more frustrated at. He's understanding more the kids.…He's not screaming that much.…And between us…he's like open now…to understand more what my needs are.

While Janisa was pleased with the change in her husband Gustavo, she also acknowledged there was work for her to do so that her husband knew that she actually valued the changes in his behavior. She said:

> There's one point that I'm still working really hard on it. And the point is validating him more. Validating him, which I know I don't do it that often but I have to do it. I'm trying really...to do those things.…I know [now] what he needs. What makes me happy and I know what makes him happy.

Janisa was no longer actively criticizing her husband as openly, but she was struggling with the next step, praising him. From this interview we are not able to discern whether Janisa did not feel she had the tools to take the next step of praising Gustavo or whether the context of their lives was so challenging that there simply was not time available to make this leap. We do know, however, that she recognized this as a need, an important first step in behavior change.

There were some exceptions to this positive trend, notably among a small number of Latino men and women in the Reading sample, and two Latino couples whose relationships ended during the course of these interviews. As noted earlier, the SHM curricula were developed in the United States and reflect U.S. cultural values. In practice this meant, for example, that one of the expectations for communication was that both parties would share their perspectives and be heard by the other spouse. For a small group of SHM participants who were more recent immigrants to the United States, this "communication norm" seemed to differ from their cultural norm, causing more conflict for some couples as they navigated this disconnect, particularly among some of the women (Flores, Tschann, Marin, and Pantoja, 2004).

Moreover, once couples were in the United States, their traditional gender roles shifted in many ways. For example, some women assumed a breadwinner role. Couples spoke of these situations as upsetting the expected order of their relationships. For a small number of Latina

women, this meant adopting a less traditional model for communication, which left the men feeling as if their roles in the family had become too domestic, or in their words, too "wifey." For these couples, the changes seem to have led to increased dissatisfaction with their relationship and conflict. Sara, a Latina woman from the Reading site, shared her thoughts about this. She stated that her husband's perspective was that she exaggerated everything. She said that Hector, her husband, often told her to "look at the rest of the world, there are worse things." Sara, however, did not agree. She said, "Because the people I am surrounded with, they all have a good husband. And I don't. That's it."

It is also worthwhile to note that especially in situations in which men were unemployed or underemployed, tensions about gender roles also emerged. Take for example, Diego and Abrianna, a couple from the Bronx site. Diego was unemployed and Abrianna worked and went to school. When asked about how their perceptions about gender roles affected their family, Diego referenced his Puerto Rican upbringing. He explained what happened when he lived with an uncle and aunt and later his grandparents:

> …women were the housewives, the men were the providers....even though he [Diego's uncle] worked and his wife worked…when she came home she would…do dinner, the kids would be bathed,…he would flip on Sports Center...[but] he would check the kids' homework….When I was with my grandmother…she would clean…she would have dinner ready…in the morning when we woke up she would have it [breakfast] done for us…that was my expectations of a woman….

Notably, Diego explained that the only reason the uncle helped the children with their homework was because he was more formally educated than the aunt. Abrianna, who is African-American, also grew up in a household in which traditional gender roles were in place. The difference, she explained, is that in her family her mother was not employed, unlike in her own circumstances where she is the breadwinner and her husband is unemployed. Her feelings were strong on this matter and she was quite expressive when she shared her perspective:

> …my mom didn't work. She was a housewife. Dinner was cooked, [the] house was clean, but she didn't work so what else was she supposed to do? …My mom used to fix dinner for my father because he was *working*. *Working* men get fed…and that's how I was brought up.

She went on to say that she had been employed since her early teenage years, which is why she felt it appropriate for her not to cook and clean (among other things) for her husband. In a nutshell, she explained, "[Diego] don't do nothing…."

Later in the interview, when discussing money and work in the relationship, Abrianna described the couple's situation as "very tense," and Diego agreed. The interviewer followed up by asking him if the tension was related to his feeling that he was not in the man role since his

wife was employed and he was not. Diego replied, "That's exactly it…I'm feeling like I'm being belittled, you understand?"

With tensions like these in the forefront for many of the couples in the study, they commonly reported cycles of separating and getting back together over the course of their relationship and marriage. As noted above, a few couples who were participating in the series of interviews broke up during the study. It is not known, however, whether these breakups were part of the "typical" cycle of breaking up and getting back together, or whether they were permanent in nature. The majority of couples, however, reported feeling happier. They had a strong sense that their relationships could get better and experienced a restoration of hope for their future.

These positive feelings and separation stories parallel the findings in SHM's final impact report: Couples reported being happier in their relationships as a result of participating in SHM; however, the program did not reduce the proportion of couples who separated.

Theme 5: Couples Learned and Practiced New Ways of Communicating

As couples gained new perspectives on their relationships, they also developed new understanding about the different ways they could manage conflict, and do so in more positive ways that could potentially strengthen their relationships. The methods taught by SHM programs represented a new path, distinct from the conflict resolution strategies couples had used previously. For example, Christopher, a husband from the Bronx site, said, "Some of these techniques I never would have thought of…it was new to me." With time, however, couples were able to recall and speak about the skills and concepts they learned in the SHM program with ease. Carolina, from the Reading program, described one of the basic ideas in Within Our Reach:

> …at the beginning of every class, they teach a thing called The Three Keys. That I think has helped a lot because it's like I said earlier that one of the keys is like "Don't slide." That you think, you meditate before saying whatever you want to say, because if you push through things, you may end up making a decision that is not going to have good results. But if you think it over and discuss things first, and after that you, you know, make the decision that does help a lot.

Still, couples found it challenging to apply at home what they had learned, particularly when arguments with their spouses became heated. They did, however, report understanding that there were accessible skills and tools for them to use once they had cooled down. Camille, a wife from the Bronx program, shared her perspective:

> …there were techniques they taught us [but] it's hard to put them into place sometimes 'cause you don't have the time to sit thinking, "Ok, let me calm down."…Sometimes I feel like, "This is what you did and you need to fix it."…we implemented some of the stuff they taught us…it's just that we don't always remember it…like pulling up them cards…we don't have time for that protocol exactly [laughter].

Like other couples participating in this study, after disagreements, this couple was able to reflect together about what they could have done differently, resulting in more positive communication than they had before participating in SHM.[22] Another couple who had faced similar difficulties were asked during the final interview round about what had changed in their behavior toward each other when they were angry. The wife Shauna responded:

> I learn[ed] to listen…let him have the floor for a change. 'Cause I got a thing, he could be talking and saying something [and] without me noticing, I'd cut him off...like "I already know what you're gonna say so it's not worth you saying it..." and I really don't know what he's gonna say but I think I do....[So] learn to stop and listen to the ending.

And her husband Aarón said:

> …in the beginning we were always revert[ing] back to how we first came through the door…we just said, "F___ this exercise. You do it. I ain't doing the…thing. I know I'm right."…and then we realized…if we actually implement…we might realize that we're actually doing something wrong to one another.

Theme 6: Couples Wanted More Support for Parenting

Research has shown that a couple's ability to agree on parenting strategies and to coordinate parenting their children is associated with overall family functioning (Morrill, Hines, Mahmood, and Córdova, 2010; Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, Frosch, and McHale, 2004). In these interviews, individuals reported that they had distinct expectations for their spouses regarding relationships with their children, particularly about the level of involvement in guiding, supervising, and disciplining them. In Reading, consistent with the concepts of *marianismo* and *familismo,* there was an expectation that women should take the lead role in parenting and caregiving (Raffaelli and Ontai, 2004; Guilamo-Ramos et al., 2007). As Sara said:

[22]This is in line with the concept from Loving Couples, Loving Children (curriculum used in the Bronx, New York, program) that couples should "turn towards, not away" from one another.

> …one knows that it is the man that goes out to work and brings in the money, and the woman has to have everything clean, feed the children, and bathe the children...that's the role we play.

Her husband concurred. When asked about who set the expectations and rules for the children, Hector said, "She [his wife] sets them and that's it. Almost all the time, she is the one educating the children."

The sentiment that men should provide, and women should be in charge of the home was also espoused in the Bronx; however, when circumstances made this impossible, couples there expressed less discomfort with changing roles. Couples in this location tended to adhere less strictly to gender roles, perhaps because there were more African-American and blended families, and because immigrant couples had been in the United States a longer time. The wife in one African-American couple, who was the current primary provider, stated:

> He couldn't find any work so he stayed home with the kids and I worked. At one point I was working three jobs, which I didn't mind…. as long as you're taking care of the kids, and I don't have to worry about that, we're good.

While couples generally enjoyed being parents, they cited parenting as one of the most difficult roles they played and commonly reported in both study locations that it was a source of conflict. With respect to parenting, Jerome, a husband in the Bronx, summed up his feelings succinctly: "There's nothing easy about it."

Parenting was a challenge to couple relationships for many reasons. In some cases, husbands and wives had different expectations about their parenting roles. In the following situation, the wife wanted the husband to be more of an authority figure, a firm disciplinarian. She stated:

> [He] loves them, he takes care of them, but I wish he was more strict....I mean I always had the idea in my head, even when I was a little girl, "Well I'm gonna take care of the kids, my husband is gonna punish them." She continued, "I'm a little more realistic now, we can share the part but I can't do it all."

In other cases, the husband had different expectations, largely based on cultural norms. Even though he lived in the home as the primary caretaker with the children while his wife temporarily lived in another country, a husband from Reading still expected her to parent and be responsible from afar for how the children developed. During her absence, two of their teenage daughters became pregnant. The wife explained that her husband's expectation that she maintain control of their children while she was away caused stress in their relationship. She said, "…it affected our marriage to the point of screaming…I would scream at him saying, 'What are

you doing, why didn't you pay attention?' It was not stable for a while…to the point that I wanted to leave."

In the case of one blended family, particular issues arose related to differences in parenting between Donna (the biological mother), Jerome (the stepfather), and the biological father. In this triangulated situation Donna did not always agree with the way her current partner, Jerome, was parenting. In private (particularly for smaller issues), she would tell the child to ignore whatever Jerome had suggested. Donna stated, "I'm gonna let [Jerome] think he got the final [say] but then me and my son get together, you know, if it's necessary we'll talk [separately away from him]. If it's something serious I don't go over [Jerome], but if it's something [minor]…."

In addition to this challenge, Donna and Jerome disagreed with the way the biological father parented. Jerome stated:

> It's like two different diametrically opposed households in terms of structure and rules…and that can be a real problem for him [the child] to have to constantly keep doing that mental gymnastics…so that's why I think I'm just going to have to speak to his father.…

Donna, however, worried about such an interaction becoming heated and tried to keep exchanges to a minimum, a difficult task since the biological father picked up the son every weekend. Her preference was for her current husband to just "say hi and that's it." She said, "I be very nervous when he [the biological father] comes up to the house...I know [Jerome]'s mouth and my son's father...he ain't no joke either…so it's like yeah, I'll be stressed.…"

These circumstances resulted in the family experiencing tension every week related to child pickups and drop-offs, and the child regularly received feedback, disciplinary strategies, and direction from three differing perspectives.

While it was not expressly hypothesized by the program's developers that parenting challenges would be an issue that would attract couples to the program, some couples did come to SHM with some expectation that the program would help them manage conflict about parenting roles and most left wishing they had gotten more parenting content. A wife from the Bronx stated, "I was hoping there would be a little more on parenting...I wish we'd done more." This emerged as a key issue over the course of the interviews and was a topic that couples felt went largely unaddressed. A husband from the Bronx stated, "They never really talk about children in SHM…I was eager to address that issue but it was brought up once every eclipse…they were more concerned with the husband and wife aspect.…"

Interestingly, several couples reported that their children were not only motivators for their attending SHM, but that they used some of the strategies they learned in the workshops

with their children in an effort to support positive parenting practices. Children also served as a reminder to couples to keep at it, remain engaged in the program, and work on bettering their relationships. Shauna, a mother in the Bronx, described feeling like her children were keeping her in check: "They keep an eye [on us] to see if it has worked." Moreover, in at least two instances, strategies learned in SHM were used by biological parents and stepparents with nonresidential caretakers in an effort to coparent more effectively.

Section 7

Discussion and Insights

In earlier sections of this paper, we highlight what is known about poverty and culture and how these two factors might affect the marriages of low-income African-American and Latino couples. The review suggests that the economic and cultural contexts in which relationships are embedded can shape couples' behaviors and attitudes in their relationships in important ways — themes that are echoed in the findings from the interviews. The data from this study make several contributions to existing literature, allowing us to confirm, and in some cases expand, the knowledge base from other bodies of work that focus on similar populations. This section summarizes insights about our learning, focusing primarily but not exclusively on data that diverge from the current literature or on new findings that to the best of our knowledge have not been presented elsewhere. We also offer considerations for recruitment, staffing, and curriculum content for future relationship education programs.

Couples May Benefit Further from Programs That Create More Robust Partnerships with Other Community Service Providers

Consistent with earlier research, our data show that the couples who participated in this research effort (as well as those who were part of the larger SHM study) faced a number of interpersonal, economic, and resource challenges that fundamentally affected their relationships. To varying degrees, all the couples experienced issues like infidelity, ongoing conflict, physical and mental health problems, and unemployment or underemployment and associated economic stresses. Though not a novel finding for this population, the severity and ongoing nature of the difficulties these 16 couples faced was arguably more substantial than anticipated by the research team and SHM's program developers.

When the program was being developed, one notion often discussed was that if low-income two-parent families could receive support that would encourage them to improve the quality of their relationship and stay together as they managed conflicts that are common among married couples, then fewer children would live in single-parent families, whose incomes would likely be even lower. By recruiting couples whose income was under 200 percent of the poverty line, SHM researchers expected to end up serving a population of couples who were perhaps struggling economically, but were generally able to modestly support their families. However, the couples interviewed for this study talked about facing much greater challenges than modest incomes, which SHM programs were not equipped to address, in part due to restrictions in use of federal relationship-skills funding. SHM programs provided "light touch" assistance in this

area, consisting in most local programs of information and referral to community resources, and very limited emergency funds.

Neither did the couples interviewed for this study have access to supports through family and friends, networks that have been thought of as an important resource in assisting with tough circumstances like these. This kind of support has been particularly valued in African-American and Latino cultures, in which there is a historical precedent for accessing and relying on extended family and others outside of the immediate family unit as a way of addressing and coping with life challenges (Cauce and Domenech-Rodríguez, 2002; McAdoo, 1981). However, it is clear that for the 16 couples interviewed in this study, the use of supports external to the immediate family unit was limited, though it did vary by site. The Bronx study participants included African-American and more acculturated Latino families. These couples reported interacting with family and friends fairly regularly. But in some cases, they also made decisions not to approach these individuals for emotional or concrete assistance. When they did, the benefits were appreciated. Camille stated that she really valued the few friends she does have. Even though they speak only "once or twice a year," they "don't judge…so that's why they're good friends."

Thus, in the absence of family and friend networks to turn to for help with material needs, linkages to social service agencies outside of the SHM program played a vital role in the couples' support system, and they interacted regularly with community organizations as a potential way to mitigate more concrete life challenges, like the lack of resources. Couples, particularly those in the Bronx, were connected to a variety of agencies before they enrolled in SHM, such as public assistance, the Women Infants and Children's program, home visiting services, educational programs for children, housing agencies and shelters, mental and physical health services, substance abuse agencies and 12-step programs, job training and work assistance programs, and others. Despite receiving services from multiple social service agencies, couples did not mention connections or dialogue among the various service providers. Moreover, it is not clear whether referrals to services made by SHM staff while the couples were in the program were useful. Jerome from the Bronx stated, "He [an SHM staff member] did give me some information on some job aspects." When asked if they were helpful, he replied, "Not really, they weren't really in my category. I don't know why he gave them to me." Another respondent, Christopher, said, "…with the job leads, I went...but they wasn't hiring…but you know at least he [an SHM staff member] tried. And that was a blessing."

The Reading study participants were comprised of individuals and couples who had more recently immigrated to the United States, and there was a nearly universal lack of connection with social service agencies outside of SHM. These couples varied in the number of significant connections with family and friends. The couples' primary resource for concrete needs

was the SHM program, which was limited in its capacity to address the multiple and sometimes severe needs of couples.

Our findings here — that couples entered the SHM program with varied support from family or friends and that they had limited and largely uncoordinated contact with community based agencies — is an important point of note for programs implementing similar services. While SHM's information and referral services were well intentioned, valued by couples, and considered a "blessing," the depth of unmet need among these couples suggests that future relationship education programs will need to seek more effective ways to help disadvantaged couples meet their most pressing needs for services beyond relationship education.

One example might be for relationship education programs to develop partnerships with employment service agencies that have clear mechanisms for tracking and measuring whether couple's employment needs get met in the short and long term. Relieving financial strain could certainly go a long way toward alleviating some of the challenges couples face. Marlena, a wife from Reading, explained how the lack of fiscal resources affected her relationship:

> It [not having money] is stressful. One puts up with it and puts up with it. Then something small [happens]…then all of a sudden the most stupid thing, you take it out on the other one.

Given what couples shared and what the literature reports about the effects of poverty on family interactions, stability, and divorce, relationship education programs that find meaningful ways to help couples address the conditions of poverty might stand a better chance at reaching the long-term goals SHM set out to achieve.

Couples May Benefit from Programmatic and Curricular Strategies Designed to Support Long-Term Behavior Change

Research on marital interactions suggests that relationships benefit when there are more rather than fewer positive interactions between partners (Gottman and Notarius, 2000). At the outset of SHM, the majority of couples in this study reported being in significant distress, with tensions running high and damaging interactions commonplace. Participation in SHM appears to have alleviated some of this distress. According to couples, the reduction in negativity occurred in several ways. Couples learned concrete strategies that resonated with them and that were straightforward enough that they were able to implement them at home with each other. They also were able to see conflict as normal so that it was not viewed in such a negative light.

These behavior changes, however, were not without difficulty. In the "heat of the moment," facing challenging and conflict-laden situations, couples found it difficult to apply what

they learned and reported that they simply became overwhelmed. For example, Donna from the Bronx program said:

> When we argue…we won't speak to each other, you know, and then...after [things calm down] he'll call or I'll call…and break the ice...after we break the ice, then we practice on how to use the tools that we learned.

Importantly, using newly learned skills and tools was achievable. Donna, and the vast majority of the other participants in this study, reported that they were willing to practice the skills and strategies they learned in the relationship education workshops. While it is not clear whether the order in which change happens matters, it is clear that couples were able to achieve meaningful, positive change in their relationships through concrete actions (application of skills or strategies) or by thought (viewing the relationship in a more positive light). Data from these interviews suggest that the group format of the workshops may have been a particularly important contributing factor, providing a means for couples to compare themselves with others and come out ahead.

The group, however, appears to be just one mechanism that affects behavior modification. Literature on adult behavior suggests that change requires a considerable amount of time and effort and that in times of stress people with few resources generally revert back to previous behaviors (Knowles, 1972; McCubbin and Patterson, 1983; Zimmerman, Olsen, and Bosworth, 2000). These findings would suggest that similar programs might want to build in as many opportunities as possible for couples to practice newly learned skills in a variety of contexts and with staff available to help support couples in these activities. Jerome, Donna's husband, specifically suggested that having the opportunity to practice strategies one-on-one with his wife would have been a welcome approach that would have helped them retain and apply what they learned:

> Let [Donna] and I do it.…I tried discussing issues with [the facilitators] while we're in the group, and that worked to a certain extent. But I found out that later on, that we didn't really discuss the entire issue.…So, therefore, I found that the best way for [Donna] and I to resolve an issue…is sit down [together] and deal with it. And I found that to be the best way.

Couples May Benefit from Programs That Take into Account the Interplay of Gender, Culture, and Employment in Couple Relationships

SHM's goal was for couples to enroll and attend all services together as a couple. Yet, because recruitment took place primarily in schools, community centers, or social service settings, it was often the wives who first heard about SHM and then went home and "marketed" the program to

their husbands. While this was an unexpected part of the program's recruitment strategy, it turned out to be a good thing: Most of the women in this study said that they were open to participation because they felt that they were at the end of their rope in their relationship. They were looking for a way to fix what was wrong. In this way, gender was an important determinant of how couples initially perceived and interacted with the SHM program.

More generally, gender is also an important component of family culture and organization. Structural factors external to the family units in this study, for example, unemployment and underemployment, emerged as being particularly salient factors affecting the enactment of gender roles. For more traditional and/or less acculturated Latino families, such as the Reading couples in this study, gendered values like *machismo* and *marianismo* were espoused as being long-held beliefs, and for men, in particular, it was important for these behavioral norms to remain intact.

The reality, however, was that many of the men we interviewed were unemployed. Women then sought to make up the difference, assuming a breadwinner or coprovider role and working outside the home. This upended their conceptions of who should play which role and contributed to conflict in the marital relationship.

For the Bronx families, it appears that both African-Americans and Latinos (with some exceptions), were more adaptable in their views of gender roles in their relationships. There was a clear preference for men to play the provider role, but the Bronx men more readily accepted that sometimes this was not achievable, and adapted their expectations and roles at home accordingly and with more ease than the less-acculturated Reading men. The literature notes this tendency, and this is not a surprising finding given that African-American families generally hold more egalitarian views regarding gender roles, and more acculturated Latino families may subscribe less to traditional gender norms (Hamer, 2001).

For future programs that offer relationship education, understanding the interplay between gender expectations, labor market conditions, and culture might be particularly important, given the prevalence of these issues for couples in this study. While there was not one consistent way for how these concerns played out across families and communities, couples are likely to benefit from program content that acknowledges these topics as potential challenges, helps couples frame and discuss their actual experiences, and actively helps couples manage conflicts (Roy, 2005).

Couples May Benefit from Specific Curriculum Content on Parenting

A hypothesis of relationship education programs was that improving couple relationships might indirectly increase the quality of the parenting that children received. While program developers

considered the topic of parenting as a potential area of conflict, it was assumed that the basic communication and conflict management frameworks designed to improve relationships could also be used by couples to resolve their parenting conflicts.

What couples shared, however, was that the ability to navigate their roles as parents profoundly affected the well-being of their relationships, and that communication and conflict management skills were helpful but insufficient in improving their parenting practices. Perhaps it would be beneficial for future relationship education programs to include more discussions or activities to help couples clarify their roles as parents and work collaboratively to come to an understanding about their parenting style and approaches to discipline.[23] Given that the SHM impact study did not find impacts on parenting, if improved parenting is a priority for future relationship education programs, our interviews suggest that couples would benefit from more emphasis and concrete information on this topic.

Couples Appear to Benefit from Spending Time Together

Couples generally stated that the SHM program's content was beneficial, highlighting in particular the program's focus on teaching strategies for communication and conflict management. Study participants also explicitly pointed to "carving out couple time" as an area where they wanted help. As Christopher and Camille from the Bronx came to realize:

> We really need our…time....the program really, you know, made you see [that]. We got kids to raise and we want them to be raised in the proper manner but me and her also need time, too. 'Cause after they're grown up…you know, I'm stuck with this one here [laughter].

The barriers to couples spending time together touched two ends of a spectrum: Many couples wanted to spend time alone together as a couple but felt there was not enough time or money to do it; on other hand, some couples' relationships were in such crisis that the last thing they wanted to do was be together. The first point, a resource issue, was difficult to address directly. However, for the most part, the program content on communication and conflict management seemed to address the latter point. Among other things, couples thought the program helped them to understand each other's feelings, learn to appreciate each other more, and talk to each other more respectfully, which led to wanting to spend more time together. One wife, Abrianna, went from saying at the beginning of the program, "I'm just tired of waking up and saying, I don't like [Diego]," to sharing:

[23]The Supporting Father Involvement study provides a good example of an approach that more explicitly addresses parenting topics (Cowan et al., 2009).

> Now, it's just like a breath of fresh air. Like I look forward to seeing [Diego]. I love to hear him talk now.…We're changing. You got the floor. I got the floor. We're listening.…we understand…we're putting things together. No more stitching. You know.…it's a blanket now we can cover ourselves with it. We're both protected within our relationship. And it's growing.…It's a beautiful, beautiful thing.

Although SHM programs did not address resource constraints directly, they did encourage husbands and wives to spend time together as a couple, primarily via the supplemental activities.[24] Part of the goal of this facet of the program was to get couples to have fun together and enjoy each other's company, so that they had some goodwill in their banks to help them deal with and get through messier situations when they inevitably surfaced. It was also hoped that program content extolling the benefits of spending time together would encourage the couples with resource constraints to reprioritize their time and resources and take a step away from the hustle and bustle of child care to spend quality time with each other. Even couples whose patterns of time together did not change permanently after the program may have gained an important opportunity to invest in their relationship in the short term. On the other hand, in some cases, family activities, rather than "couple time," may be what bring couples the most satisfaction. Acknowledging this possibility as well as planning for ways to make the time more meaningful for everyone might be an appropriate goal.

Conclusion

Findings from this study have yielded important information about the perspectives of low-income African-American and Latino couples as they participate in relationship education programs. Despite the challenges they faced, the couples we interviewed demonstrated great resilience in sticking together, attending the program, working hard to take care of their children, and trying to apply what they learned in SHM. They reported benefiting from the program content

[24]Supplemental activities were educational and social events complementing core workshops, designed to keep couples engaged with the program for the full year. Activities generally fell into one of four categories: (1) Booster sessions, which were similar in format to the program's core workshops and used core curriculum concepts but introduced new relationship-related material. (2) Educational presentations that provided resource information to help couples address relationship stressors and/or learn new skills. Examples included sessions on financial planning, budgeting, and accessing the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), and workshops on child development and baby care. (3) Curriculum refreshers that were integrated with social activities. One example was a "date night" series in which couples came to the program for a short session on a relationship topic led by staff, followed by couples' going out on a date, to reinforce the importance of spending time together as a couple. (4) Programwide events for couples or families that were more social than educational, such as a potluck dinner or a movie night for the whole family, aimed at helping couples build positive social networks through connections with the other couples, families, and program staff. For more information, see Miller Gaubert et al., 2010.

and noted that the time alone as a couple to focus on their relationship was a rare treat and an important benefit of the program.

As outlined above, couples clearly articulated aspects of the program they found particularly beneficial and others that they would like to have seen enhanced. More broadly, these interviews provide a window into how low-income couples' relationships — and their capacity to respond to relationship skills curricula and programming — are shaped by the interplay of racial, cultural and socioeconomic factors.

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