



The Accomplishments and Limits of Government-Funded "Healthy Marriage" Programs

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Since 2001, the Healthy Marriage Initiative of the U.S. federal government has spent over one billion dollars on programs to promote marriage and marital relationship-building. This policy was intended to increase the number of happily married U.S. couples – and also decrease poverty, which is more common among unmarried families, especially those with children. My research allowed me to meet many couples who were drawn to government-funded marriage education classes, people who hoped to improve their communication and satisfaction, avoid breaking up, and become better co-parents. Over three years, I observed more than 500 hours of healthy marriage classes and interviewed 60 staff members and participants in these programs. My goal was to understand if healthy marriage programs are useful, not just for couples who were relatively comfortable economically but also for the most vulnerable families with limited income, time, and other resources. Would these programs help less privileged participants? Their perspectives shed important light on efforts to strengthen families by teaching relationship skills.

A Tale of Two Families

I met Christine and Bill, both white and middle class, in a training session for a government-approved relationship curriculum called “Mastering the Mysteries of Love.” I watched them as they learned a new relational skill – “showing understanding” – which involved active listening and learning to see things from a partner’s perspective. Both were college-educated and financially comfortable. Enjoying retirement in an empty nest, they appreciated the opportunity to discover more about one another and fall in love again after decades of marriage.

I also met Cody and Mindy in a government-funded relationship skills class – this one for low-income, unmarried parents. Both 18 and white, Cody and Mindy were broke, accounting for every penny Cody earned at intermittent low-wage construction jobs. With their eight-month-old daughter, they currently resided with several other people in a 300 square-foot studio apartment. Typical of what are often referred to as “fragile families,” Cody and Mindy were poor, unmarried, and struggling to stay together while raising a child. Like Christine and Bill, they also learned in a class I observed about showing mutual understanding. But unlike Christine and Bill who found it easy to implement the lesson in their comfortable circumstances, Cody told me that he was more worried about stretching their last few dollars to cover both milk and bus money than about figuring out how to understand deeply Mindy’s thoughts and feelings.

Lessons from a Policy Focused on Learning about Love

Although the parents I met in this research challenged instructors who claimed that marriage would improve their family finances, they did find the relationship skills classes useful. It was hard for low-income couples to practice these skills, given the economic and social challenges they faced – including unpredictable work schedules, cramped and unsafe housing, and the stress of budgeting. Nevertheless, they experienced the classes as a rare opportunity to communicate free of the material constraints that shaped their daily lives. Hearing other low-income couples talk about their challenges with love and money offered a perspective on their own struggles and allowed them to better understand how conflict and unfulfilled hopes for marriage are shaped by poverty. For this reason, my research suggests that relationship education can be a valuable social service in a highly unequal society, where stable, happy marriages are increasingly becoming a privilege of more advantaged couples like Christine and Bill.

Nevertheless, the experiences of low-income parents in marriage classes point to ways in which relationship-building programs could be more useful – if they placed more emphasis on how economic stressors take an emotional toll on relationships and focused less on promoting the dubious message that marriage in and of

itself benefits poor families. On numerous instances during my fieldwork, I observed marriage educators presenting a selective interpretation of research by claiming that marriage is a direct route to greater economic prosperity and life satisfaction. They did not acknowledge the tendency for healthier, happier, and wealthier people to marry at higher rates; nor did they acknowledge that discrimination against unmarried parents, who have fewer resources and rights, influences the connection between marriage and economic prosperity. Presenting a distorted picture to low-income parents is not likely to convince them.

Social and Policy Implications

My research suggests actionable conclusions:

- Instead of simply pushing marriage among low-income couples, who typically delay it for financial reasons, teach couples about how poverty can undercut commitment and explain the conditions under which marriage can be either beneficial or not helpful. By taking some of the personal onus off couples experiencing relationship stress, particular couples could gain by recognizing which issues in their relationships are socially patterned and which are amenable to relationship-building solutions. Not all problems can be solved by blaming partners.
- Encourage couples to talk about shared stressors. Programs that help couples interpret their challenges as normal and directly related to the larger, external stressors of their lives can, in turn, do a better job of maximizing the interpersonal effectiveness and stability of relationships.
- Program teachers should avoid assuming that low-income parents necessarily have deficient spending habits or relationships. Low-income couples are more receptive to messages that recognize their unique challenges and validate their strengths. Curricula and instructors should avoid moralistic judgments about the choices couples make about family formation and finances – recognizing that some couples have very good reasons for not getting married and that many low-income parents already go to great lengths to stretch meager resources.

In the final analysis, solutions to family instabilities and inequalities in the United States go beyond relationship-building programs alone. Although marriage itself may not produce greater financial stability for couples, education and well-paid work do – and they make it more likely that couples will get and stay married. Labor market interventions and family-supportive policies, such as living wages, tax credits, and subsidized childcare, would do more to promote marriage and family stability than interventions solely focused on relationship skills.

Read more in Jennifer M. Randles, *Proposing Prosperity? Marriage Education Policy and Inequality in America*, Columbia University Press, (2016).