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PARTNERING AND PARENTING IN POVERTY: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS
OF A RELATIONSHIP SKILLS PROGRAM FOR LOW-INCOME, UNMARRIED FAMILIES

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Abstract

Since the mid-1990s, the federal government has funded numerous relationship skills programs, including some specifically targeting low-income, unmarried parents, in an effort to strengthen couples' relationships and increase family stability. The previous research on the effectiveness of these interventions has revealed mixed results about whether such programs can improve the relationships of lower income couples who tend to experience lower relationship quality, lower marriage rates, and higher rates of relationship dissolution. This article draws on in-depth qualitative data collected during an 18-month ethnographic study of one federally funded relationship skills program for unmarried, low-income couples expecting a new baby. Overall, though parents found the financial management lessons included in the classes only minimally useful, if at all, they found other aspects of the program particularly useful for three main reasons: (1) classes allowed parents to focus exclusively on their couple relationships in ways they rarely did otherwise; (2) program incentives helped parents make financial ends meet that month; and (3) parents learned that the challenges they personally experienced were often endemic to the romantic and co-parenting relationships of unmarried parents who have few resources and experience more challenges that tend to undermine relationship quality, such as financial stress and relational ambiguity. Engaging with other couples around shared challenges normalized couples' relationship problems and lessened the resentment and animosity that typically characterized their partner interactions. These findings have important implications for healthy marriage and relationship policy. Program developers should avoid lessons that imply low-income, unmarried parents' spending habits and family-formation decisions are deficient. Interventions should instead encourage couples to discuss their shared challenges and minimize their tendency to individualize relational and financial strain. © 2014 by the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management.

INTRODUCTION

When Congress overhauled federal welfare policy in 1996 through the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), policymakers included provisions to encourage marriage and two-parent families to enhance the economic and social well-being of American children. In the service of this goal, the federal Office of Family Assistance of the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) launched the Healthy Marriage Initiative (HMI) in 2002. The HMI has since served as a clearing house for information about healthy relationships and marriages and distributed federal grants for government-supported relationship and marriage education programs. The main goal of the HMI is to help individuals and couples learn how to create and maintain healthy, high-quality interpersonal relationships as a way to promote family stability. State and community-based organizations apply directly to the ACF for grants that support the creation and administration of

educational programs for the general public and specific target audiences such as engaged couples, high school students, and low-income, unmarried parents.

Research consistently finds that couples from low socioeconomic backgrounds tend to experience lower relationship quality and less relationship stability (Conger, Conger, & Martin, 2010). Policymakers and academics often refer to these couples as *fragile families* given their greater economic and relational instability. Many low-income, unmarried couples who share children value and aspire to marriage, but various social and economic factors, including unmet standards of relationship quality and financial stability, operate as barriers to fulfilling these aspirations (Carlson, McLanahan, & England, 2004; Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Edin, Kefalas, & Reed, 2004; Edin & Reed, 2005; Gibson-Davis, 2007; Trail & Karney, 2012). In addition to financial concerns such as lack of money and stable, well-paying employment, low-income couples disproportionately face many noneconomic challenges that tend to undermine their ability to create and sustain high-quality relationships that most likely lead to marriage and greater stability for children. These challenges include trust, domestic violence, substance abuse, infidelity, mental illness, and ongoing conflict with previous partners with whom the parents share other children (Carlson & Furstenberg, 2006; Carlson, McLanahan, & England, 2004; Hill, 2007).

Because economically disadvantaged couples who share children are more likely to break up and less likely to marry than their more affluent counterparts (England & Edin, 2007), many policies that have focused on strengthening family relationships, including the PRWORA and the HMI, have included specific provisions targeting low-income, unmarried parents. The impetus behind devoting public funding to relationship education programs specifically targeting disadvantaged families is that strengthening couple relationships could likely promote the numerous positive benefits for children and adults that are associated with relational stability, especially stable care and consistent economic support for children from both parents.

In the almost two decades since the passage of the PRWORA, policymakers, program developers, and scholars have been particularly concerned about which types of relationship interventions can best support low-income families as they confront these challenges and strive to create healthier relationships, realize their aspirations for marriage when that is a personal goal, and create more stable social and economic home environments for children. The present study qualitatively investigates one exemplary community-based, federally funded relationship skills program for low-income, unmarried parents, pseudonymously referred to hereafter as Thriving Families. The goal of the research was to generate an in-depth understanding of how participating parents viewed and evaluated the effectiveness of the program. Overall, parents found many components of the program useful—especially group discussions of relationship challenges—while they felt that other lessons, namely those about how to manage money, were only minimally useful, if at all. This qualitative perspective has important policy implications for accomplishing the family-formation goals of both welfare reform and disadvantaged families.

BACKGROUND AND RELATED LITERATURE

Numerous meta-analytic reviews have found strong empirical evidence that relationship and marriage education programs can improve relationship satisfaction and communication for romantically involved couples (Blanchard et al., 2009; Butler & Wampler, 1999; Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Cowan, Cowan, & Knox, 2010; Dion, 2005; Fagan, Paterson, & Rector, 2002; Guerney & Maxson, 1990; Hawkins et al., 2008; Reardon-Anderson et al., 2005). Much of the prior evaluation research that has tested the effectiveness of relationship and marriage education has focused largely on programs that primarily served white, middle-class, well-educated couples

who were already married or planning to marry in the near future (Cowan, Cowan, & Knox, 2010; Dion, 2005; Johnson, 2012; Ooms, 2007). Most of what empirical research has shown about the effectiveness of relationship skills programs—and hence much of the evidence used to make a case for continued government support for them (Fagan, Paterson, & Rector, 2002)—has been based on the experiences and outcomes of a social group that was significantly more socially and economically advantaged than parents who are most likely to be living in poverty and in need of welfare (Teitler, Reichman, & Nepomnyaschy, 2007). Moreover, by their very nature as premarital and marital enrichment classes, the programs evaluated in these studies targeted couples who had already decided to marry. Therefore, those who comprised the samples for these studies were select groups of couples who demonstrated an already high level of commitment to their romantic relationships via marriage.

The focus of most relationship and marriage education programs has been relationship skills training (Hawkins et al., 2004), including those funded through the HMI and state healthy relationship and marriage initiatives (Brotherson & Duncan, 2004). Guided by the premise that the communication and conflict resolution skills taught in existing programs were universally applicable and effective in strengthening interpersonal relationships—while at the same time recognizing the unique relationship challenges of low-income individuals, couples, and families—curriculum developers designed several relationship skills education programs specifically for low-income participants. Some of these newer targeted curricula have been used in large-scale, government-funded evaluations studies, including the HMI Supporting Healthy Marriages and Building Strong Families demonstration projects for low-income, married couples and low-income, unmarried couples expecting a new baby, respectively. These curricula tend to use more roleplay, discussion, and couples exercises in lieu of lecture-style teaching, include culturally relevant examples for African American and Hispanic populations, and specifically address relationship issues that are especially challenging for low-income couples, such as multiple-partner fertility, how to create and sustain trust, fidelity, abuse, father involvement, positive role models for marriage, and goal setting (Dion, 2005; Ooms, 2007). Unlike most curricula intended for a general audience that focus almost exclusively on communication and conflict resolution skills, financial literacy lessons on how to cooperatively manage money, set financial goals, and budget also play a central role in these targeted curricula for low-income couples.

Some of the research on programs that target low-income couples reveals positive results. Hawkins and Fackrell's (2010) meta-analysis of 15 relationship education programs for low-income couples found that, overall, the programs produced small to moderate improvements in communication and relationship quality. Kirkland et al.'s (2011) experimental study of a relationship education program primarily targeting rural African-American parents found that those who participated in a six-week study of a program focusing on couple and co-parenting dynamics reported positive effects on prosocial behaviors in children and fewer co-parenting disagreements. In addition to the results from skills-based programs, government-supported therapeutic interventions to strengthen couple and family relationships, such as the Supporting Fatherhood Involvement program that included low-income, unmarried couples, showed significant positive outcomes in terms of child support, father involvement, parent-child relationship quality, and couple relationship quality (Cowan et al., 2009; Cowan, Cowan, & Knox, 2010).

Evaluations of relationship skills programs specifically for married, low-income couples have also found positive results. Einhorn et al.'s (2008) evaluation of relationship education for a racially and ethnically diverse population of both unmarried and married prison inmates found that participants showed substantial gains in relationship satisfaction, dedication, and confidence, as well as communication

skills, friendship, and fewer negative interactions with partners. Another relationship skills program for married military couples evaluated by Stanley et al. (2010) found that couples who participated in 14 hours of relationship skills education had a significantly lower risk of divorce than the control group after one year. One of the three major government-sponsored healthy marriage evaluations projects, Supporting Healthy Marriage, targeted low-income, married couples and also found small positive effects on relationship outcomes, including levels of marital happiness, positive communication, and warmth and support. However, the program did not affect whether couples stayed together at the one-year follow-up (Hsueh et al., 2012).

Other evaluation studies have not found that relationship and marriage education programs for low-income populations have had the intended outcomes. In 2012, the Building Strong Families (BSF) Project, another one of the three major, multisite healthy marriage evaluation projects funded and coordinated by the federal government, released the final findings from eight relationship skills education programs for low-income, unmarried parents. Building Strong Families had two main components, relationship skills education and family support services, including services aimed at improving parenting skills and addressing employment, physical and mental health, and substance abuse. When averaged across all eight programs distributed throughout the country, the experimental groups that took 30 to 42 hours of group relationship skills classes were not more likely to stay together, marry, or report having higher relationship quality than control groups (Wood, McConnell et al., 2012; Wood, Moore et al., 2012). However, the BSF program based in Oklahoma City did show significant positive results in terms of relationship quality and stability after 15 months and relationship stability after 36 months. All eight sites showed positive outcomes for African Americans at the 15-month follow-up, though not after 36 months. Moreover, in what is called an *intention to treat strategy*, all participants in the experimental group, even the 45 percent who did not attend a single group meeting, were included in the analysis. Therefore, the positive benefits of these programs were likely underestimated because the overall outcome results referred to the intervention effects for both the 55 percent of those who did attend in addition to the nonattenders (Cowan, Cowan, & Knox, 2010).

As public funding for relationship skills programs comes up for Congressional renewal in the future, large-scale evaluation studies such as Building Strong Families are useful for identifying outcomes as defined by predetermined program and policy goals. Yet, in-depth, smaller scale studies that focus on participant perspectives are also necessary to identify and understand the mechanisms by which these types of programs succeed or fail to accomplish those goals. Inductive ethnographic research is particularly well suited for questioning and comprehending how participants themselves define program success. For these reasons, the questions of how and why low-income, unmarried parents benefit (or not) from government-supported relationship skills programs lend themselves to qualitative methodologies. Qualitative research, especially of the kind that combines observational and in-depth interviewing techniques, is particularly well suited for understanding how program participants engage with and interpret program messages based on their lived experiences (Edin, 2003). To fully understand how policy operates at the point of delivery, we need more richly detailed descriptions of how policy is translated into actual practice vis-à-vis the actions of those on the frontline who implement policy (Brodkin, 2003).

Sparks (2008) provided one such in-depth qualitative study of a relationship awareness and communication skills program for low-income, single parents in Oklahoma that was a part of an orientation for new Temporary Assistance to Needy Family (TANF) or welfare clients. Sparks found that the curriculum used by the state aligned well with interviewees' relationship histories and current challenges. Many of her respondents reported using the skills several months after completing the

session, leading her to conclude that clients were receptive to relationship education and could likely benefit from it. Conversely, Heath (2012, p. 106), who studied the same mandatory skills programs for TANF clients in Oklahoma, found that single mother TANF recipients were largely unreceptive to class messages because of the program's "focus on marriage and lack of attention paid to clients' circumstances and needs" and the instructors' middle-class perspective. The mothers did however feel that some of the information they received about relationships and communication was useful, though they resented that attendance was a mandatory condition of receiving aid.

In the first qualitative study of relationship and marriage education for high school students, many of whom were economically disadvantaged, Halpern-Meekin's qualitative findings (2012) closely paralleled the quantitative results revealed in her previous companion study (Halpern-Meekin, 2011) of the same sample populations. Students at half of the six schools Halpern-Meekin studied showed positive gains in terms of relationship skills, while students at the other three—including the two most socioeconomically disadvantaged schools in the study—did not. Halpern-Meekin concluded that students were receptive to these courses and could learn valuable information about relationships from them.

Given the potential usefulness of relationship interventions for supporting satisfying relationships for adults and greater family stability for children, many scholars have made calls for further research in this area. Huston and Melz (2004) argued that social scientists should focus on conducting rigorous research that can critically evaluate what kinds of relationship support programs and policies can help disadvantaged families and society the most. McHale, Waller, and Pearson (2012) stressed the importance of studying interventions that support cooperative co-parenting arrangements regardless of the parents' relationship status. Johnson (2012, 2013) noted that much of the existing research on relationship dynamics and interventions has not adequately studied poor couples and couples of color, and does not yet justify public expenditures diverted from welfare funds on government-supported marriage initiatives. He therefore has advocated for additional research that focuses on identifying how best to address the relationship stressors disadvantaged couples face. Responding directly to Johnson, Hawkins et al. (2013) argued that the existing research on interventions targeting low-income and minority couples, especially positive results from the Building Strong Families (Wood et al., 2010), Supporting Healthy Marriage (Hsueh et al., 2012), and Supporting Fatherhood Involvement (Cowan et al., 2009) evaluations, are sufficient cause for optimism and justification for continued support from the government. This exchange between Johnson and Hawkins et al. ultimately points to the need for more research on interventions targeting disadvantaged couples that focuses specifically on how existing programs can be tailored to address their unique needs, challenges, and relational dynamics.

I seek to contribute to this important area of research by drawing on data I collected during an 18-month participant observation study of the Thriving Families program. This program was funded directly by the federal government through a HMI grant and targeted the same population as the Building Strong Families evaluation, but was not previously studied as one of the eight Building Strong Families research sites. Previous research has explored the challenges of providing relationship education to low-income individuals and couples from the perspectives of those who implement and coordinate healthy relationship programs. These challenges include recruitment, finding effective ways to address the unique relationship stressors of low-income populations, and establishing community partnerships (Ooms & Wilson, 2004; Vaterlaus et al., 2012). By highlighting participants' perspectives about the usefulness of the Thriving Families program, I hope this analysis will complement the large random-assignment studies funded by the HMI. Collectively, they can help ascertain which kinds of relationship interventions best support the

family-formation goals and relationship quality and stability of low-income, unmarried families.

This study shows that, overall, Thriving Families couples found the classes useful, especially the communication skills training that was central to the program and healthy relationship and marriage interventions generally. However, parents found the financial management techniques included in the training only minimally useful given how little money they had to manage. What parents found most helpful was that the classes offered them a rare opportunity to communicate free of the material constraints that overwhelmingly characterized their daily lives, such as lack of time and space necessary to focus on their partners. Classes also provided a unique collective forum for discussion, allowing parents to interpret much of their emotional stress and, in many cases, their unfulfilled hopes for marriage, as the result of trying to sustain romantic relationships amid significant economic challenges. Meeting in groups with other couples who shared similar socioeconomic and family circumstances enabled parents to understand that many of the challenges they faced were not simply the result of personal shortcomings, but rather part of the inherent difficulties that many parents trying to raise a family in poverty encounter.

In what follows, I describe the Thriving Families program, the parents who participated in it, my role in the field, and my data collection and analysis methods. Next, I describe in greater detail how and why parents found some elements of the program useful and not others. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the implications of these findings for policies and programs that seek to strengthen relationships and increase relationship quality and stability among low-income families.

THRIVING FAMILIES

According to the Thriving Families program's mission statement, its principle goal was to remove barriers to marriage and strengthen the formation of healthy families:

Participants will build the skills necessary for family formation, such as: decisionmaking, financial management, attending to relationship quality, father involvement, career or job development, co-parenting, and marriage readiness.

It used the *Together We Can: Creating a Healthy Future for Our Family* curriculum specifically designed to improve the co-parenting relationships of unmarried parents. Developers at the Michigan State University Extension received a Special Improvement Project Grant from the Office of Child Support Enforcement of the United States Department of Health and Human Services to implement and evaluate the curriculum. It focused on five major relationship issues that are particularly germane to low-income, unmarried couples: (1) positive co-parenting relationships, (2) stress and conflict management strategies, (3) ongoing involvement of both parents, (4) money management and child-support payment, and (5) healthy decisions about romantic and couple relationships. A pilot study of the program found that the experimental group experienced higher levels of trust and relationship satisfaction, improvements in decisionmaking and problem solving, lower levels of relationship aggression, and improvements in understanding the connections between parenting and couple relationships (Adler-Baeder et al., 2004).

The federal government designated the site as an exemplary healthy relationship program. Unlike many other relationship skills and marriage education programs funded by general grants for healthy marriage community organizations, the community-based organization that coordinated Thriving Families received a HMI grant from the Department of Health and Human Services specifically to create the program. They received an award for \$500,000 per year for five years beginning in 2006 to implement a relationship skills program targeting unmarried couples

around the time of the arrival of a new child. For this reason, the program was subject to more direct federal oversight of the use of funding. During the 18 months I spent studying the program, the federal government selected Thriving Families as one of three programs nationwide to provide technical assistance to other programs within the same grant area of relationship skills classes for low-income, unmarried couples with children. The Office of Family Assistance also selected the program as one of the top 25 “best practices” programs in the country.

The Thriving Families program was based in a midsize West Coast city of approximately 500,000 residents. Most parents who participated in Thriving Families qualified as poor according to federal poverty line standards, were racial or ethnic minorities, and had little formal education. Eighty-four percent of those who enrolled in the program were on some form of public assistance, such as food stamps or TANF. Over half, 53 percent, reported combined household incomes of less than \$1,000 per month, while only 13 percent had household incomes of at least \$2,000, and fewer than 3 percent of participants lived in households that collectively brought in \$3,000 per month or more. Most of the parents had more than one child, and many lived with their own parents and partners. Since a three-person household was considered to be living in poverty if they made less than \$17,600 in 2008 (Department of Health and Human Services, Poverty Guidelines, 2008), these figures indicated that most participants in Thriving Families classes lived well below the poverty line. Half of all participants had only a high school diploma or General Equivalency Diploma when they enrolled in the classes. Less than 20 percent had some postsecondary education, while one-third of participants had not graduated from high school or obtained a General Equivalency Diploma at the time of enrollment. Thriving Families classes were also very racially and ethnically diverse: 40 percent of participants identified as Latino/a; 24 percent as African American; 22 percent as white; 3 percent as Asian or Pacific Islander; 2 percent as Native American, and 9 percent as multiracial or other. Almost all of the program participants were recruited through their doctors’ offices, local pregnancy support centers, or informational recruitment sessions offered as part of local Women, Infant, Children (WIC) supplemental nutrition program offices for low-income, expectant mothers.

METHOD

Between March 2008 and August 2009, I completed 150 hours of participant observation in Thriving Families classes; three small focus groups with eight total Thriving Families couples (two with two couples each, and a third group with four couples); in-depth interviews with 45 parents who graduated from the program (22 fathers and 23 mothers, including 21 couples); and in-depth interviews with 15 Thriving Families staff, nine of whom were instructors. The six staff interviewees included the organization’s founder and executive director, the director of educational services, the program coordinator, and three program recruiters. I also observed several informational recruitment sessions for the Thriving Families program held at a local social services office. Finally, I conducted participant observation in a two-hour training session for the *Together We Can* curriculum offered at a national marriage educator conference.

At the beginning of each class, instructors introduced me as a graduate student doing research on relationship education classes. Unlike everyone else, I did not attend classes with a partner, nor did I participate in couples’ exercises. I did have my own workbook for each class and often filled out the same worksheets instructors asked participants to complete. These notebooks also allowed me to discreetly take extensive field notes during the lessons and breakout exercises. Though I was

overt about my role as a researcher, parents and instructors easily and completely incorporated me into the classes, and I participated as fully as I could in the classes when activities and life experiences reasonably allowed. During breaks, I ate with participants, chatted with instructors and recruiters, played with older children, and held newborns so parents could have both hands free to eat. This gave me an opportunity to observe participants, instructors, and staff during classes, as well as interact with them more informally.

I discretely took field notes during each observation period using three techniques that were, respectively, most appropriate for the three kinds of ethnographic data I sought in the classes. For class lessons, as participants filled out worksheets, I jotted shorthand field notes in my own workbook, which was particularly effective given that my notes about how instructors taught particular lessons and how participants responded corresponded to the worksheet information about that particular class lesson. During breakout sessions and meals, I used a small notebook to record jottings during trips to the restroom and unused classrooms in the community centers where classes were located. Finally, as the field site was approximately 80 miles from my residence, I used the return trip home to record verbal field notes into a handheld audio recorder. Within 24 hours of each observation period, I typed more detailed field notes based on these jottings and recordings.

After observing six months of classes an average of four hours per week, I began recruitment for the interviews. I obtained parents' contact information from program staff, as parents had signed a permission form to be contacted after the end of the class series for research purposes. On a rolling basis, I contacted the full list of parents who had taken the English classes and graduated from the program between September of 2008 and June of 2009, which was a total of 88 couples. My response rate was 27 percent if you include the three individuals whom I did not interview as members of a couple. The completion rate for parents who enrolled in the classes during this time period was approximately 50 percent. I chose to interview those who had completed all 14 hours of class time required for graduation so that respondents would be able to reflect on the full course series. According to an independent program evaluation, the two main reasons parents offered for not completing the program once enrolled were the birth of a baby and work conflicts. Narrowing my sample to only those who graduated likely meant that I interviewed participants who had an overall greater positive assessment of the program. I aimed to interview parents approximately six to eight weeks after they attended their last class. I chose this length of time to strike a balance between giving them enough time to incorporate the information into their daily lives, while not letting so much time elapse since they finished the program that they would likely forget their experiences. Those I observed in classes overlapped to some degree with my interview sample. As the program offered several class series simultaneously, I had observed 14 of the 45 parents in classes prior to the interviews.

The 45 parents (21 couples and three individuals) I interviewed ranged in age from 17 to 57, though most were in their 20s or 30s, and the average age in my sample was 27 years old. Nineteen respondents (42 percent) were African American, eight were Latino/a (18 percent), 17 were white (38 percent), and one (2 percent) was Asian American. At the time of the interviews, 40 of the parents were still romantically involved with the partners with whom they had taken the classes. Two were separated but planning to co-parent after their birth of their daughter, while another two—one man and one woman—had broken up with their partners and agreed to speak with me as individuals. One was still involved with her fiancé, but he was not available to participate in an interview with me. Of the 21 intact couples I interviewed, 13 were cohabiting, five were cohabiting and engaged, and one was dating and co-parenting their six-month-old son but living separately. The final couple was married but had different last names and did not inform the program

staff of their marital status so they could qualify for the program incentives, which were only available for unmarried parents per federal funding guidelines.

I interviewed parents both separately and as couples, depending on their preferences, the space available in their residences, and child care needs. Eleven couples chose to be interviewed together, while I interviewed the other 11 couples and three individuals separately. It is possible that partners' presence influenced how much parents were willing to discuss their relationships, but I found that either together or alone, parents easily and willingly discussed their challenges and divergent views on the classes and instructors. I opted to let parents decide whether to be interviewed separately or together to increase their comfort, aware that each scenario had advantages and drawbacks. For the couple interviews conducted together, I ensured that each partner answered my questions separately. If they indicated they agreed with what their partner had said, which was not always the case, I asked them to elaborate about why they agreed so as to ensure that I had responses to my questions from both members of the couple.

With the exception of the sole married couple who was jointly raising their four shared biological children and another couple in which the man was the social but nonbiological father for his fiancée's biological daughter since before birth, all of the other 41 parents were either expecting or had just experienced the arrival of their first shared biological child. In one case, a couple was already jointly expecting another baby by the time of the interview. As is the case with many unmarried, low-income couples, almost half (19) of the parents had children from previous relationships. Of the 20 unmarried couples who were still romantically involved during the interviews, at least one partner had a child from another relationship in 13 cases. At the time of the interviews, only 13 (eight of the women and five of the men) of the 45 parents were employed. Thriving Families couples were therefore more likely to be cohabiting and less likely to be employed than similar couples included in fragile families samples, but were very similar in terms of age, education, racial and ethnic diversity, and incidence of multiple-partner fertility (McLanahan, 2006).

The interviews lasted from one to two hours. After collecting demographic information and a brief sketch of their relationship history, I asked questions pertaining to three broad topics: their experience in the classes, if and how they found the course material useful, and if and how they thought the experience influenced their couple and family relationships. When I interviewed staff and instructors, my questions focused on their views of the program, what they thought about the course content, and what motivated them to work for a healthy marriage program. The majority of my interview questions were open-ended. I also asked all respondents at the end of the interview if they wanted to comment on anything else pertaining to their experience, thereby allowing them to discuss issues they found important that I did not anticipate.

All interviews were transcribed in full, and I thoroughly coded both the interview transcripts and my field notes for major themes using the grounded theory inductive coding techniques described by Charmaz (2006). Coding proceeded in two primary stages. First, during the open coding phase, I read the field notes and transcripts with a focus on emergent descriptive and analytic themes. I then employed a focused coding process that entailed a line-by-line rereading of all the transcripts and field notes with these inductive codes in mind. I was able to observe parents' participation and their spontaneous responses to course subjects and interactions, while the interviews gave them the opportunity to be self-reflective about their experiences. This combination of complementary qualitative methodologies was necessary to gain a full picture of how relationships skills classes unfolded on the ground; how staff, instructors, and parents interacted; how parents responded to course material; and how parents felt about the classes in ways that were not always

obvious given their participation in class. I wrote biweekly analytic memos summarizing the major thematic findings that emerged from the interview transcripts and detailed field notes. During the course of my fieldwork, I employed both deductive and inductive ethnographic orientations (Burawoy, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1969; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I entered the field with knowledge of existing theories about the social and economic constraints faced by low-income parents and findings from previous studies of relationship and marriage education. Given that there are no previous ethnographic studies of relationship skills programs for low-income couples, the Thriving Families classroom served as an ethnographic *tabula rasa*, a context in which the conceptual categories I used to code my data necessarily emerged from the respondents themselves.

FINDINGS

Overall, parents found the Thriving Families classes useful for three main reasons I discuss in detail throughout the remainder of this article. As noted above, much of the previous research on relationship skills classes for unmarried, low-income couples is from large random-assignment studies that have focused on key outcomes such as measures of relationship quality, relationship stability, and quality of communication. Because my open-ended questions elicited responses from parents that were not solely focused on similar measures, this study reveals and highlights some of the more indirect mechanisms by which group relationship skills classes are personally experienced as beneficial for low-income, unmarried couples with children.

First, the incentives offered by the program and the constructive communal atmosphere of the classes allowed parents to focus exclusively on their couple relationships in ways they rarely did otherwise. For many participating couples, the incentives were also essential for making financial ends meet the month they took the classes. Though it provoked discomfort for some parents, the classes' concerted focus on couples' relationship priorities and challenges encouraged them to positively confront those issues they could more readily ignore amid the busyness, distractions, and economic and emotional strains of daily life.

Second, though parents found many of the financial management skills only minimally useful because of the limited amount of money they had to manage, they did appreciate discussing financial topics, especially when instructors emphasized inexpensive family bonding strategies. The lessons on communication skills were the dominant focus of each class series regardless of the particular instructors, and all instructor pairs tended to adhere strongly to the explicit material and lessons in the curriculum about communication and conflict resolution. However, there was significant variation in how instructors taught the lessons on money management—including how to budget, distinguishing between needs and wants, and identifying financial values and goals—and parents responded quite differently to these disparate approaches.

Third, the classes taught parents a lasting lesson about how their seemingly unique relationships challenges were shared by most other couples in the classes. Many of the parents initially wanted to participate for this very reason. Though parents could not often recall specific budgeting or communication techniques weeks after leaving the classes, most eloquently articulated without my prompting in the interviews how the classes helped reduce feelings of loneliness and blame in their relationship struggles. By validating one another—and in many cases serving as a relationship quality barometer for other couples—parents learned, perhaps more than anything else, that their relationships challenges, such as those with trust, anger, and money, were neither unique nor an indication of individual failings

or couple incompatibility. The classes indirectly taught them that the challenges they personally experienced were often endemic to the romantic and co-parenting relationships of low-income, unmarried couples who were raising children together with few resources and a disproportionate share of factors that often undermine relationship quality, such as unemployment and relational ambiguity. This normalized their relationship problems and lessened the resentment and animosity that typically characterized interactions with their partners.

"A Lot of People in Survival Mode": Providing a Safe, Distraction-Free Space for Positive Communication

One of the major benefits of the program according to parents was the incentive package for participation that not only allowed parents to exclusively focus on their couple relationships during the classes, but enabled them to be in the classes at all. These incentives were intended to defray any costs associated with participating. The program paid each couple \$10 per class for a transportation stipend, offered free on-site child care for an unlimited number of children of any age, and catered a hot meal from a local restaurant for each class meeting. Initially, even with these inducements, classes were very small. Staff were constantly troubled about low attendance and retention problems since it was common for couples to show up to one or two classes, never to return, or to only attend sporadically throughout the seven-week class series. Program coordinators experimented with several modifications to the program to increase attendance, including offering longer classes on Saturdays for fewer weeks and expanding their outreach efforts in the community. Yet nothing substantially increased attendance and retention until, in an effort to recruit more couples, program coordinators implemented a graduation stipend, whereby if both partners attended 14 hours of class time they received a \$100 stipend in cash or gift certificates for local businesses, such as grocery or children's stores. Before the program implemented the graduation stipend, some classes would have as few as one couple participating, and usually no more than three or four, with many attending only occasionally. Once the program began to offer graduation stipends, instructors, staff, and I often had to rearrange chairs and tables before the beginning of class meetings just to have room for the 10 to 20 couples who would show up.

Though this ultimately worked out to less than \$4.00 per hour, per person, this was a significant amount of money for many of the parents who signed up for Thriving Families, many of whom were unemployed, in substantial debt, and struggling with adding another member to their families. Diane, 29 and Latina, told me that since she was only bringing in \$90 every two weeks through her unemployment checks at the time of the classes, and her fiancé, Pedro, 35 and Latino, was out of work and making nothing, the money they got for going to the classes doubled their income that month. Not incidentally, Diane learned about the state's TANF program through another mother taking the classes and was receiving cash assistance by the time of our interview. For those couples who were neither employed nor on government assistance, the gas money and graduation stipend were their only income for that time period. In my interviews with them, and even when instructors asked at the beginning of a new class series why they decided to attend the classes, many parents candidly and quickly responded that they were there, in large part, because of the money. The importance of the money and other incentives Thriving Families couples received for attending the classes could not be overestimated. For some, the money was extra cash they planned to use to take their family out for a nice dinner or to buy baby toys or new clothing they otherwise would not have been able to afford. For others, the \$10 transportation stipend they received after class was the only way they could afford food or diapers for the very next day, while the \$100 graduation

stipend was necessary to cover that month's electric bill or rent. Thomas, a 21-year-old, African-American father, noted,

we got the \$100 probably about two weeks before I got paid . . . We needed gas in the car and diapers for the baby. We also needed the car smogged. Then we had money left to get something to eat, so we really needed the money at the time.

As the program coordinator told me, most of the couples were simply trying to survive on a day-to-day basis, both relationally and economically:

I call them to confirm they're coming to class. If we have a list of 20 couples who have enrolled in the class, five of those phone numbers are now disconnected because they can no longer pay the bill, four of the couples have broken up in the last five days, but half of those couples will probably be back together next week in the class, and they love each other. And some people can't come because of the health care situation. There are a lot of sick babies, and people have problems with their pregnancies . . . We've had people in the classroom who are homeless. They're just going from place to place, and one of the reasons they come to our class is because it's safe, it's a good place for their kids to play because there's nothing dangerous going on, and they're able to get a warm meal . . . It's just a lot of people in survival mode.

What often got parents' feet in the door, as they themselves and several of the staff noted, were the incentives that helped them make it to the next day. They showed up because for two or more hours they and their children were off the streets and could depend on a hot meal or two if there were leftovers, which the instructors and staff always encouraged them to take. Their kids got to eat, and for at least a little while, could play or watch videos in the company of other children in a heated room if it was cold outside or in air-conditioning if it was hot.

Once there, parents appreciated how these incentives enabled them to focus, perhaps for the first time, on setting personal and family goals, deliberately talking through relationship challenges, and simply having the time and space to talk with their partners or among similarly situated couples. As Victor, 24 and African-American, said, "it made time and pushed away other time we didn't need, like for arguments and all that." Even though Lisa, a 24-year-old, Latina focus group participant, found some of the class exercises "silly," she enjoyed how the classes encouraged partners to simply appreciate one another: "They say 'tell her you love her,' you know simple things like that. I think it's good when they teach you how to do that because [my boyfriend] never says it. I got teary eyed when he did." Larisa, 21 and white, told me that "before the class, I had never sat down, held his hand, looked him in the face, and told him something personal." The classes provided the literal and temporal space for couples to attend to one another without diversion. Veronica, 30 and African American, noted that

while the pregnancy drew us closer, what drew us even closer was sitting there talking about it because we didn't really talk about it before. We were always in the moment in the classes. I was always in pain, and that helped me open up more to him about it.

Many parents explicitly commented on how the classes demanded their partners' personal attention in ways other situations did not. Even for those parents who often had the time and space to communicate frequently, they still appreciated the impetus provided by the classes' relational emphasis and overall positive tone about families and relationships. As Victor further commented,

we might have argued all the way until we got to the door, and then we might try to sit away from each other a little bit, but then because I didn't know anyone in there, I couldn't feel the same way. You can't be mad forever, or you don't want to hold a grudge. Going into the class erased all that.

Several parents used the word *safe* to describe the classes and how they uniquely encouraged couples to address their interpersonal dynamic in nonjudgmental ways. Peter, 35 and white, recounted, “I really felt like it was neutral ground. It was neutral territory after I had been there a while. When I first went in there I thought I was going to be attacked, but it wasn’t like that.” Likewise, Chelsea, 32 and white, told me that

you could tell the truth, and I felt like you wouldn’t be judged because we’re not angels. I believe in going to get help if you need it. They didn’t judge us at all and that made you feel safe.

The expectation to deliberately communicate was particularly important for couples who were experiencing the transition to first-time parenthood and had not talked directly about the challenges of that transition and the insecurities it provoked. As Gwen, 24 and African American, explained through tears during our interview,

I’m glad we did it because we actually had time to talk with so many appointments during the end of my pregnancy . . . and [my partner] used the class as an opportunity to talk about his father and about how his childhood had been hard, and I was surprised by these things he didn’t open up and tell me before.

For experienced parents, the classes encouraged them to refocus on their couple relationship when their attention had previously been directed toward the kids. As Veronica described,

it reverted our focus back to us because for so long it was the kids, you know, and we were learning to balance the kids versus us. So it was him focusing on him, me on me, and then the kids . . . We’ve been doing a lot more family time lately.

Similarly, Gina, 36 and African American, described how

the classes helped open our eyes to a lot of things we were taking for granted. We didn’t know how to deal with the baby, coming in and still having the same love, you know our respect for each other . . . and I wasn’t focused on him no more. I just cared about my baby and I was pushing him away. And because of the prior relationships that I had, because I have older children, I was kind of pushing him away from being a father because I was a single mother before he came along.

The classes also provided couples with a neutral, commonly understood language and method to identify when they and their partners were not communicating effectively or empathically. This often entailed parents policing one another’s behavior, such as when Lisa described how her boyfriend “repeated everything from class” and would tell her “oh, didn’t they say not to do that in class.” In other cases, parents could identify negative communication dynamics by referring directly or indirectly to specific communication skills they learned in class without pointedly criticizing their partners. Isaiah, 24 and African American, described fights he had with his girlfriend, Gwen.

If she and I aren’t on the same page and the argument starts to escalate, I always tell her to explain exactly what she’s trying to say. If I don’t get it, tell me what I’m missing. I do that now instead of just shutting down.

He could not recall the exact term for this tool from class—active listening—but he remembered that the instructors discussed it and that it helped them communicate better. Others, including Gwen, recalled specific concepts and how their partners used them in interpersonal communication. As Gwen described,

when there was any altercation or argument or anything with communication, we had something to refer back to. I am really trying hard to communicate better, and I went

to that class, and [Isaiah] would mention one of the phrases or topics we had talked about, and I thought “oh, you were really listening.” Yeah, he’ll say, “you know what you’re doing right now is not being able to communicate feelings and that’s called . . . oh goodness, what’s that called . . . defensive listening. He’ll refer back to things.

Finally, all the instructors emphasized to couples the importance of empathic, low-conflict communication for the sake of their children, whether or not the parents stayed together. Though Ramona, 30 and Latina, had broken up with her son’s father by the time of our interview, she enthusiastically described how

as far as parenting, I did learn a lot, that a lot of your parenting when you have a partner has to do with how good you and your partner get along. You know, it all involves the same circle. If you and your partner practice love and being at peace, and peace within each other, it’s like a circle your child falls into. And if you fall into a circle that’s negative, your whole relationship also has a big influence on your children. That’s what I learned.

Similarly, Malia, 21 and African American, had separated from her unborn daughter’s father immediately after finishing the classes, but she still felt that she had gained valuable insight about how to create and maintain a cooperative co-parenting relationship despite no longer being romantically involved. She said,

it was good because the class gave us tools to use that are best and healthy for the baby whether we’re together or not. It’s not about us, it’s about her . . . For them to tell us to treat that person as a business partner if you’re not together, that makes a lot of sense. It’s strictly business now. Now it’s the baby, is she okay? Not fighting.

Thus, overall, parents significantly appreciated the communication skills techniques. They thought the lessons on empathic and active listening were a great way to approach talking with partners and children, so sensible in fact that many parents referred to them as “common sense.” As one parent said in class, “this is the way we should all communicate with everyone anyway. It’s just a good reminder.” In addition to the money, most participants were in the classes to get help with reducing conflict and connecting more with their partners. Their responses to my focus group and interview questions indicated that the classes were very effective for helping them accomplish these main goals. Nevertheless, what was most challenging to parents was employing the skills outside the context of the classroom after the class series had ended when they did not have a group full of other couples and instructors to support their efforts. As Chelsea noted during our interview several weeks after she finished the classes, “we don’t use them and we forget. That’s our fault, not the classes fault.” Like many other parents, Josephine, 33 and African American, wanted the classes to be longer because they were too brief and “squeezed too tight.” It was easier to communicate in the classes than at home because they asked us to participate. They asked us to say how we felt.” At home, she and her partner did not have the right atmosphere to encourage the more positive communication techniques they learned in class.

Implementing what they learned therefore proved to be prohibitively difficult after parents finished the program. Some reasons for this—parents’ tendencies to forget the positive communication techniques after time had elapsed and the difficulty of having to initiate and follow through with the techniques all on their own without instructors’ and fellow participants’ support—are likely universal reactions to relationship skills programs, regardless of couples’ socioeconomic status. However, other factors described by the parents suggested that much of what couples learned—such as the importance of deliberately making time for and devoting exclusive attention to one another while actively listening—was particularly challenging to implement for low-income couples who face significant material constraints, including limited physical space and emotional challenges such as the psychological toll of financial exigencies.

During one class, Joseph, a Latino instructor in his early 30s, gave the group a homework exercise. He asked parents to spend 15 minutes actively listening and talking to one another about their feelings before going to sleep each night. The point, he told us, was to set aside a little time each day just for one's partner to keep the relationship strong. The following week, Joseph asked if everyone had done the homework exercise. One of the fathers, Cody, 18 and white, was there with his girlfriend, Mindy, also 18 and white, with whom he was currently raising their infant daughter. The family of three struggled to make financial ends meet on the money Cody earned from construction work and other part-time jobs he could pick up intermittently. Cody answered that they had wanted to, but since they lived in a small studio apartment with his father, their daughter, and occasionally another friend who stayed at their place because he was homeless, they had no privacy and thus no opportunity to talk with the baby, the dad, and the friend sleeping on the floor right next to their bed. Cody compared their apartment to the classroom, which suggested that it could not have been more than a few hundred square feet. Unless he and Mindy wanted to go into the closet or the bathroom, he told us, they had no privacy in the apartment. Their neighborhood had too much crime for them to feel safe going outside, especially at night. Finally, he said, though he really wanted to know more about Mindy's day at home with the baby, he was simply too tired to keep his eyes open after working two full shifts during the day. Joseph, the instructor, empathically nodded that he understood their predicament, but simply responded by saying that they should still try to do what they could to keep their relationship strong: "Ok, but just try for those few minutes a day when you can. They really matter." Cody and Mindy agreed and promised they would try.

Cases similar to Cody and Mindy's predicament were very common among other Thriving Families couples. Since the majority lived with parents, friends, and other couples, many parents were hard-pressed to find a quiet, private space to talk without interruption by numerous other household members living in the same one- or two-bedroom dwellings. This was especially the case for couples who already had children, since the unemployment of one or both partners made it likely that parents were caring for their children (and often others') around the clock. Unless they were school-age, very few Thriving Families children spent a significant amount of time outside the home given that day care was unaffordable for most of the families. Since many parents neither owned a car nor could afford to go out together for entertainment as a couple, finding quality alone time was rare. This was compounded by the reality that most couples were adjusting to having a new baby and the fatigue that ensued. Since I did the majority of the interviews with parents at their residences, I experienced firsthand how the frequent traffic of children and other household members would render it difficult for many of these couples to find a quiet space to talk uninterrupted.

"Money's Easy to Mangle When You Have Some": Discussing Finances, Budgeting, and Family Values

Because of personal inclination or an expressed preference from the parents who attended their classes, instructors spent most of the allotted class time discussing communication issues. With few exceptions, parents were more interested in learning communication skills than financial management strategies, not in spite of their financial precarity, but because of it. Long accustomed to stretching the meager resources they did have through budgeting, minimizing their lifestyles, and simply doing without, most parents did not believe that significantly improving their financial situation was amenable to strategies they could learn in a class. This was in direct contrast to how they viewed communication in that most of the parents

felt they had a lot to learn about how to be better communicators. Most class series did include at least a brief, often one- or two-hour, discussion of how to manage money more effectively. According to the instructors I interviewed, the two-day instructor training encouraged them to decide how and how much they would teach financial skills based on input from parents who enrolled in a particular class series. The class notebook had specific lessons on financial tips, such as how to create a monthly budget, set financial goals, distinguish between needs (e.g., food, a place to live) and wants (e.g., beer, designer jeans), and how to contact creditors to work out a payment plan.

Depending on which strategy instructors used, some parents viewed the money management strategies as hypothetically useful, while others interpreted them as condescending and judgmental. One set of instructors, Rochelle and John Wade, a married African-American couple in their 50s, talked about how they saved money and how to prioritize the right expenses. Per the guidelines of the program, the Wades distributed plastic boxes and calculators to couples and encouraged them to save receipts, file important papers, and keep diligent track of expenses. Rochelle described how she made a habit of putting all her change in a jar each night and encouraged participants to do the same. "It's change you won't even miss, and you'll be surprised how much you can save after a month." She also emphasized saving receipts to find needless expenses couples could cut. She used the example of her favorite frivolous expense—a daily cup of coffee from Starbucks—to illustrate how such expenses could add up quickly and be converted into savings if, say, she would opt to make coffee at home. Rochelle and John also strongly promoted the concept of "paying yourself first," which meant putting at least a little money away, perhaps as little as \$10, from each paycheck in a savings account as a way to "invest in yourself and your family, a way to value yourself." The pay yourself first message, which Rochelle and John encouraged above all else, was intended to convince parents that learning to save was an important exercise in self-respect and a way to love your children.

Amber, 24 and white, took the Wades' classes with her 35-year-old, Latino fiancé, Saul. She told me that she was extremely offended by how Rochelle and John talked about money and saving:

They talked about how they put money away in a savings jar because they have lots of money to do that. I'm sorry, but I live check to check, and I can't afford to put money away like that. I have rent, children, bills, and they're like, "if you have money, you'll find a way to put it away." No we can't! We need our money to save for our bills and our children. . . . Then, the last day of class, [Rochelle] said that job means "just over broke." That's what a job is. That's what they were telling us. J.O.B. means just over broke. . . . So my husband's job is nothing? How did I feel? I felt like they were putting me down all the time. . . . How can you say that to people? We're in this class, we're not rich people. I just couldn't believe I was sitting in this class, and they were telling me what I don't have and why I'm this way and you're that way.

According to Amber, the Wades' financial tips signaled that they had little understanding of just how much some of the couples in the classes were struggling. Some couples' budgets were so limited that even the pocket change at the end of the day was a significant amount of money they could not afford to let sit in a jar until the end of the month.

Katherine and Karl Rogers, another married African-American couple in their 50s who taught the classes, took a different approach. For their lesson on finances, Katherine and Karl had the class collectively create a monthly budget based on an income of about \$1,500 a month, complete with typical expenses for a couple with young children. They relied on the parents to suggest the amounts and encouraged them to include a rainy day fund for unanticipated expenses, such as car repairs. But

there was always much disagreement among the parents about how much certain things actually cost. One time during this exercise, one female participant suggested that she could grocery shop for a family of four for the entire month for just \$100. "I don't know where you shop," another participant quickly exclaimed, "but I've never been to that store!"

Some parents who took the Rogers' classes commented that knowing how much they spent on certain things each month was helpful. As Abigail, 21 and Latina, noted,

they started teaching me how to manage money, what you want to spend your money on, all the things you don't need, that you should save money for the baby, for your bills. That helped me out a lot. It reminded me that now we got a baby to think about, and it's not about us no more. It's about her, what she needs, what she wants.

However, others described how learning to budget more effectively did not help address their financial challenges because the problem was not frivolous spending or lack of planning, but rather not having enough money to get by. Josh, an 18-year-old, white participant who also took the Rogers' classes, told me "the stuff on money would have been much more helpful if we had any. If we had money, I could walk into a store, go down the aisles, put everything in the cart I need, and calculate right there." Josh boasted that he had always been good at math and had been doing his mother's taxes since he was 11. He also described in great detail how he was able to save his family \$200 one month. He taught them to buy in bulk, what could easily stay frozen for longer, and how to not overspend before the next paycheck by keeping track of fixed expenses such as rent and utilities. The problem, he argued, was not that he and his pregnant fiancée, Sarah, 17 and white, were ignorant about how to stretch money as far as possible. The problem was that the little money they did have could only be stretched so far. Diane, the woman who was initially bringing in \$180 a month from unemployment, similarly explained "the financial tips might be helpful, but at the time, what was \$90 every two weeks going to do? Even the best bargain shopper in the store, even in the cheapest grocery store, couldn't make that work."

A third set of frequent instructors, Susan and Jose Alvarez, she white and in her 40s, he Latino and in his 50s, used a different strategy to teach about money that the parents who took their classes found particularly useful and meaningful. Instead of talking directly about money, they asked participants to list all the values that were most important to them. *Family, love, and honesty* were the themes that most often topped the list. Jose next asked participants to brainstorm about how they aligned their spending and saving habits with those values. While parents found the Wades' financial tips judgmental, and the Rogers' strategies impractical, the approach taken by the Alvarazes seemed particularly amenable to parents and their precarious financial situations. Lewis, a 57-year-old, African-American father who took classes with Susan and Jose, reflected on how the classes changed his plans for the graduation stipend:

We were supposed to get \$100. I told her I'm going to do something with my part and she said, "no you're not." We're going to take the \$100 and go get some baby clothes. And I said "No, I'm going to take \$10 and do something for myself." And then after that class about money and values, I was listening to her, and I knew she was right when she first said it.

Susan and Jose also encouraged couples to discuss between themselves what their personal financial values were, such as what kinds of activities and objects were worth spending the limited amount of money the parents did have. Victor, referring to the Alvarazes' lessons on personal values and spending, noted that "the best part to me were the activities that showed you what your differences were and

where you're the same." Much like with the communication strategies, this exercise encouraged couples to discuss deeply held financial principles they did not openly talk about otherwise.

Though not married to one another, Deborah, an African American in her 50s, and Mark, white and in his early 20s, taught classes together and took yet another approach to discussing finances. They also briefly spoke of the importance of carefully calculating and keeping track of expenses. Otherwise they used most of their time allotted for lessons on money to encourage parents to spend quality time together as a family for free. They urged parents to rethink common assumptions that family time has to be about consumption and that spending quality time together necessitated buying things or spending money on expensive hobbies. In one class, we brainstormed at length about all the many low- or no-cost activities available in the community, such as going to the zoo or taking a homemade lunch to the park for a picnic. Deborah and Mark asked us to write down as many free family activities we could think of on a piece of paper. We then decorated the plastic boxes provided by the program (the ones distributed by the Wades as a tool to keep and organize receipts) with magazine photos of kids and families. When we were done, we cut up our list of activities, folded the pieces of paper, and took them home with the intention of picking out one activity to do as a family per week. Mark concluded the lesson with the message that how much you spend on family time matters much less than the amount of time you spend with family. One of the mothers in Deborah and Marks' classes, Chelsea, learned about "things we can do as a family, things to do that are healthy and cheap and just together."

"We're Not on Our Own": Normalizing and Validating Relational Conflict

The third and most significant reason parents found the classes beneficial was that they created a nonjudgmental, collective space to discuss romantic and parenting challenges with other couples experiencing the same relationship and financial difficulties. This normalized their relationship conflicts over shared challenges with kids, communication, and money. The social context provided by the classes allowed parents to understand that many of their struggles were not theirs alone, nor necessarily the result of personal shortcomings, but rather a common and shared experience among those trying to raise a family and keep a relationship intact in the midst of poverty.

In their classic study of married couples groups focusing on the transition to first-time parenthood, Cowan and Cowan (1992) found that one of the main benefits of such groups is that they help normalize the inevitable conflict that ensues as partners become parents. Watching and listening as other couples struggled with similar issues showed parents that they were not alone and allowed them to reinterpret their couple conflicts as a normal and shared experience of becoming parents. A similar process played out in several different ways in Thriving Families classes. Parents often told me they saw their own experiences reflected back to them in the relationship stories of others. They felt less alone in their struggles with partners, parenting, and poverty. What parents tended to find most useful was that the classes strongly encouraged them not to take their stress—especially when associated with not having enough money—out on one another, thereby reducing negative interactions and conflict. The classes provided a social context within which to interpret their experiences and relationship challenges as shared struggles that are exceedingly common among other couples adjusting to being co-parents, wrestling with long-term commitment decisions, and managing limited financial resources.

In addition to the incentives, this was the main reason parents gave for initially wanting to attend the classes. They specifically wanted to hear about the relationship

challenges of other couples and especially about the techniques others used for resolving common relationship challenges, such as how to handle being a parent and a partner simultaneously, how to trust more deeply, and how to resolve arguments more effectively. As Saul told me, “I wanted to hear how other couples go through their relationships, how they solve their problems. I wanted feedback from other people and to be able to relate to the stuff they had been through.” On a more basic level, many parents simply wanted to be around and talk with other adults. As Elsa, a white focus group participant in her 20s, told the group, “with three kids, we don’t see other adults very often. We’ve learned a lot about each other in a healthier way because we’re able to point out things we’ve learned from others along the way.”

The classes had this effect of engendering mutual understanding and thereby reducing defensiveness among the participants because they quickly learned—often as early as during the first few moments of class after an instructor would ask why they were there—that they shared the same relationship and financial difficulties. When I asked parents which relationship challenges they believed were the most common, the most frequent response was communication, followed closely by money. Marcy, 21 and white, told me

we all had the same problems. We were trying not to mess up the best thing we had going on. All of us agreed to why we had come to class, the whole communication thing and how it affects the kids. We all want our kids to be like, “I love my mom and dad because they can get along.”

Many others described shared financial difficulties. For example, David, a 28-year-old, African-American father, told me

almost everyone in the class had the exact same problems . . . money issues. I would say that was about 50 to 75 percent of every relationship. If you have no finances, you’re struggling. You constantly snap at each other. It’s always a headache, a frustration. Probably 75 percent of people’s relationship problems are money. If their finances were good, they’d be more open and happy, but it’s not like that . . . We didn’t argue when we didn’t have to worry about money.

Parents’ realization that their most significant and unrelenting relationship struggles were shared with others couples created a sense of empathic mutual understanding that they could apply in their interactions with partners. Parents reported that this sense of empathy gained in the classes affected their communication in two important, interrelated ways: first by reducing adversarial communication patterns based on a me against you mindset, and second, by creating a more collaborative outlook about relationship experiences that supported couples’ attempts to more cooperatively confront their shared challenges. As David explained about his partner, Mikalea, the classes

made her feel better because . . . if we have a problem, [she thinks] she’s the only one going through it. She doesn’t think that I’m going through it with her or that other people in this world have the same problems or worse . . . It doesn’t matter where you’re from, what race, religion, every house has it. It’s how you stand up to it.

Mikalea, 27 and white, agreed, stating that “I would recommend the class to others because . . . it really helps out. It shares everybody’s lives. It shows people they’re not on their own.”

Hearing about other couples’ relationship stories, especially those that involved severe financial and interpersonal distress, was often inspirational for those who interpreted their struggles as milder in comparison. Jennifer, 26 and white, described how she wanted to attend the classes so that she and Peter, her boyfriend, could communicate in a setting free of the antagonistic dynamics that typically characterized their interactions:

I thought if we could be in an environment where it's not just him against me that maybe he would be able to open up more and maybe we could work on it. That really helped. It was good because so many other couples were going through the same things we were, and others were even worse. To be able to see how some people are in the same boat as us, and some are worse off than us, it's not as bad as it seems.

By reflecting on the relationship experiences of others, couples gained new insight about their own relational behavior and that of their partners. Many parents described how they thought of other couples who took the classes as a relationship barometer, a comparison point to gauge the severity, quality, and distinctiveness of their own relationship challenges. Many also spoke about how their perception, if not necessarily their experience, of their relationship quality improved after watching more distressed couples communicate in class. As Gina described,

I'm the kind of person that feels like you're the only person in the world who is going through something, and the classes opened my eyes to that, that I'm lucky with what I'm dealing with. It's not so bad as I always proclaim. I saw couples that argued and separated over silly stuff that could be resolved.

Marcy similarly described what she most appreciated about the classes:

I met a couple that had been together for 12 years, and they had a couple of kids. They had been in [Child Protective Services], but they were finally allowed to keep them, like the newborn they just had. They were telling me their relationship has hit rock bottom to the point where they had to stay on the street with their kids. They were in class trying to keep things together for the family. That was one of the best things about the class. It kind of hurt me, but it was the best thing. I thought, "okay, your kids got taken away, but you guys are still trying to make things work," which is pretty awesome.

Parents also described how they relied on the group to help them more objectively explain things they had previously struggled to convey to their partners without being defensive, a situation that, as Jennifer put it, "where it's not just him against me." Other couples and instructors, most of whom were willing to share personal details about their arguments and relationship challenges, provided a third-party perspective that was less emotionally charged. Josephine described to me how it was easier for her to communicate in the classes than at home because

it's good to know you have someone who has been in the same position, so you're not so scared to talk to your partner about everything. Because you know other people understand where you're coming from. Because sometimes when you're just with your partner and you're just trying to explain to him, he doesn't know what you're talking about. But if there's another person who's been there, either a woman or a man, maybe he can explain to him better or allow him to understand a little better. You feel like you're not so crazy because other people are going through this too. I'm not just crazy.

Jamie, a 20-year-old, white mother, similarly explained how she was much more receptive when instructors and other parents identified how she needed to improve her communication:

It helped us to communicate better because I'm selfish and a stubborn person, but if someone else points out my flaws besides him telling me, well, he's selfish and angry too. But if we're angry and yelling at each other, neither of us wants to listen, but when they sat down and explained it to me, I realized when I'm wrong.

Participants also responded most favorably to instructors who had overcome previous relationship challenges and economic problems. Parents did not want to hear from social scientific experts about relationship trends and child development theories. They wanted to know how real couples fought, worked things out, interacted with their kids, blended families with children from previous relationships, and made ends meet when money was tight. In commenting on what they liked about

Katherine and Karl's teaching style, one couple, Giovana and Mason, both 24 and white, talked at length about how important it was for instructors to relate to the couples and how this was essential for creating a sense of empathy in the classes. Giovana told me:

They were good because they could actually relate to how couples were . . . They would also say that they would always fight, and she said she needed to work on her problems with herself and her issues before they could work on them. You've got to know what your problems are before you can address them together, . . . and with the people in the classes, it was like you're not the only one going through it. Everyone has the same problems. It's not just that they've already been through it. It's easier to relate to what they're teaching in class as opposed to someone who just reads a book and starts saying "you need to do this" like it's scripted. It's easier and better when someone has gone through the same thing, learns from it, and then teaches it.

Mason, Giovana's partner, added:

They were people who actually lived through some of the stuff they're talking about in that class . . . It was helpful to see that you're not the only couple that fights, . . . even the ones that looked like goodie two shoes. It puts your own relationship in perspective, that it's not just your relationship that's messed up or has problems. Everybody goes through it.

Another couple, Jessica, 22, and Mitch, 26, both white, found out about the classes through her Child Protective Services (CPS) case worker. They also especially appreciated the lived experience perspective of the instructors. Jessica was eight months pregnant when they took the classes and had just given birth to their daughter five days before I interviewed them. She also had a four-year-old son who no longer lived with her due to a series of arrests for drug use and possession and fraudulent checks. The judge who oversaw her case ruled that she had to take a parenting class to retain custody of the new baby and to have any hope of regaining custody of her son who was now living with relatives several hundred miles away. She told me:

Mitch wasn't required to go, but I couldn't go unless he went. I would have had to go to one of those boring parenting classes sponsored by CPS. So our CPS worker said if both of us went to that, it would count. I told him "look we get paid." I didn't tell him we have to go, but I did tell him if you don't go I have to go to a really boring class. I've been to one of the really boring lecture type classes where there's an old, bald guy talking to you for six hours who doesn't even have children. He just has a Master's degree in raising kids, but no kids. He says "Do this, and don't do that, and this is proven." Oh my god! If you don't even know what you're doing, then why are you up there talking. [Thriving Families] was different.

In the Thriving Families classroom, legitimate knowledge was not something you could learn from handbooks on marriage and family therapy, but rather something you acquired only through real life experience in the trenches of emotional heart-break and financial difficulty. Many of the instructors had struggled with both, and parents responded most favorably to those instructors who shared the intimate details of how they had come back from the brink of relationship strife and economic hardship. This encouraged couples to share stories of their struggles as well, creating a sense of empathy and hope that they, too, could stay together and prosper in the long run.

Despite their limited ability to recall details about specific class lessons and their difficulty implementing skills outside the classroom, parents could poignantly describe weeks after finishing the classes how and why they found the classes useful. It was not necessarily because the communication or financial management skills helped them directly address relationship or money problems. Rather, the group format of the classes created a communal context that revealed how many of their

most significant relationship challenges were shared by similarly situated couples. Learned in this way, parents understood the communication techniques taught in the classes as tools that could make bearing these burdens easier. Essentially, they learned the importance of being a unified team rather than adversarial individuals.

DISCUSSION

Since Congress first earmarked public funding for relationship and marriage education through the 1996 PRWORA there has been significant debate about whether the government should support these types of programs for low-income, unmarried couples. This debate hinges on the question of how effective relationship education is for accomplishing the goals of welfare reform, especially creating the social conditions in which more American children are raised in stable, if not married, two-parent homes. By focusing on the perspectives of those who are central to this debate, the Thriving Families case reveals that there are several benefits to the families themselves that could potentially support greater relationship stability for economically disadvantaged parents and children. These perspectives also suggest recommendations for how to utilize these resources to best accomplish this goal.

According to parents, the program was valuable primarily because it brought together couples who were similarly constrained and because it went to great lengths to overcome obstacles that inhibited couples' abilities to focus on their relationships. Concerns that arose in the classes and in focus groups and in-depth interviews with parents revealed that what instructors recommended for developing relationship skills assumes a certain level of economic advantage, namely parental control over time, living space, and finances. As one father poignantly revealed in a Thriving Families class, it can be prohibitively difficult for an impoverished parent to find just 15 minutes a day to talk with his partner when he is trying to hold down multiple jobs, is constantly stressed about money, shares a studio apartment with five people, and does not feel safe talking outside in a crime-ridden neighborhood. Unmarried couples in poverty live in a particular socioeconomic context in which they could implement the skills, one that inhibits their ability to practice communication and especially financial management techniques. People can only manage the money they have, and they can only practice communication skills with adequate energy, time, and space. Though finding the time and remembering how to practice skilled communication can be a challenge for couples of any economic background, low-income couples face additional daily constraints—such as inadequate housing and the emotional stress of poverty—that exacerbate these challenges.

Given that these types of programs were initially framed as a poverty-reduction and marriage-promotion strategy around the passage of welfare reform in the 1990s, many previous critiques of relationship skills programs rightly pointed out that such methods do not address the root causes of poverty (Cherlin, 2003; Coontz & Folbre, 2010; Edin & Kefalas, 2005). Pulling couples above the poverty line was not the main goal of the Thriving Families program. No government intervention of this kind could effectively address the many structural constraints faced by impoverished families. Parents found the classes useful because they temporarily suspended their socioeconomic constraints, not because they provided the means to escape them. In doing so, the program did effectively allow parents to focus exclusively on their relationships, meaningfully consider their long-term relationship prospects, and enact their commitment to their partners and their obligations to their children. Perhaps most importantly, the communal nature of the classes revealed to parents how many of their most significant relationship challenges were economic and not necessarily because of incompatibility or inherently flawed partners. This allowed them to understand that many of their problems would only get worse if they took

their financial and other stresses out on one another, and that they would not necessarily be resolved by breaking up. This finding might explain why similar programs, namely the Building Strong Families Oklahoma site, ultimately found positive effects on relationship stability, but not relationship quality, among participating couples (Wood, McConnell et al., 2012; Wood, Moore et al., 2012).

Understood as a public service that can help low-income parents create and maintain more stable co-parenting relationships, with or without being married, Thriving Families and similar programs may ultimately be effective for improving the relational stability of disadvantaged couples and hence their children's well-being. I spoke with parent after parent who told me how the classes helped improve their relationships with their partners, even though in very few cases did it ultimately influence their decisions to get married. Only two of the 45 parents I interviewed told me the classes had any impact on their decision to marry, and both were already considering marriage prior to taking the classes. Several others told me that taking the classes helped them decide to break up with their children's other parents and helped them negotiate the challenges of co-parenting without being romantically involved. For almost all the parents, the classes served as a form of free counseling they would not have been able to afford otherwise. The program offered participants a collective forum for discussing relationships, one that characterized relationship and communication problems as common and normal for all relationships. Framing this type of intervention as education rather than therapy also destigmatized talking through relationship problems, especially for those who believed that seeking counseling or therapeutic services implied their relationships were troubled. This approach reduced parents' tendencies to see one another as adversaries and encouraged cooperative problem solving. Thus, rather than understanding financial constraints as what might undermine the effectiveness of relationship strengthening programs for low-income couples, I argue that such programs can be especially useful for low-income parents. They face more than their fair share of relationship stressors, but have fewer means that enable them to access other counseling-type services when poverty-related stress ultimately takes its toll on those relationships.

CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

As relationship and marriage education policies evolve, there are many lingering questions about how best to support low-income, unmarried couples through relationship interventions. Qualitative research, especially of the kind that focuses on how participants experience these programs in the context of their daily lives, is particularly well suited for helping us answer these questions. Given this project's in-depth, ethnographic focus on the perspectives of parents who participated in one government-funded program, my analysis necessarily has several limitations. First, the federal government has funded hundreds of relationship skills programs. My findings reflect the implementation of only one. It is likely that programs with different staff and instructors, using different curricula, and implemented in different geographical locations vary in terms of pedagogical approach, class size, and other program features. That said, given its focus on communication, conflict resolution, trust, parenting, and marriage, the *Together We Can* curriculum is fairly representative of the various, yet similar curricula currently in use in government-supported relationship education programs for low-income, expectant parents. Second, since I did not observe or interview parents who participated in the Spanish classes, I do not know if they experienced the Thriving Families program differently than those who attended the English classes. Forty percent of program participants identified as Latino/a, while only 18 percent of my respondents did; their perspectives are therefore underrepresented in my analysis. Third, my ethnographic data from

class observations, focus groups, and in-depth interviews with parents emphasizes, respectively, my own interpretations of class activities and a retrospective experiential viewpoint of parents. Though I think this perspective is uniquely valuable to complement large-scale evaluation studies, it does exclude other kinds of data that are crucial for understanding the value of these types of programs, such as specific outcome measures, pre- and post-treatment differences, and differences between control and treatment groups. The Thriving Families program staff distributed pre- and post-class surveys, as well as one-, three-, and six-month follow-up surveys asking couples to rate the quality of their communication. I do not have access to this data. These measures, along with others related to program and policy goals, such as financial outcomes and children's outcomes, would be extremely helpful for determining which strategies are best suited for improving the relationships of low-income, unmarried couples and their children's lives.

The findings from this case study, especially parents' belief that the classes helped them understand the larger social and economic forces that negatively influenced their relationships, suggest that relationship strengthening programs could better help parents if they directly address poverty-related stressors. These problems, such as tensions and anxieties related to unemployment and unmet material needs, add to and compound the challenges of creating high-quality relationships, including communication conflicts, psychological distress, and the transition to parenthood. Much like a sole focus on marriage, communication skills, or financial literacy is likely insufficient to strengthen couples' relationships and improve childhood outcomes, it is unlikely that attention to couples' economic constraints would automatically improve those relationships. Therefore, my recommendation that relationship skills programs for low-income couples should also address the social and economic forces that influence their relationships is not meant to suggest that targeting economic factors, such as income or employment, is alone sufficient to support healthy relationships. As Thriving Families parents clearly described to me, their relationship challenges are multifarious, a result of numerous and overlapping personal, psychological, financial, and social issues. We already know that some relationship strengthening programs have had measurable positive effects on parents and children in low-income families. As more research becomes available from different types of government-sponsored, relationship-focused programs, we will be able to gauge which types of interventions are most helpful. Existing research, including the Thriving Families case, suggests that to be successful, these interventions will need to reflect the empirical reality that relationship quality and stability are intimately intertwined with socioeconomic stability and support.

In conclusion, the findings from this study suggest several important lessons for policymakers and program developers who provide relationship education to low-income and minority couples:

1. Avoid assumptions that parents' relationships or spending habits are deficient. Low-income couples are more receptive to program messages and teaching techniques that recognize their unique relationship challenges and validate their strengths. Curricula and instructors should avoid moralistic judgments about couples' family-formation decisions and financial circumstances, especially when working with unmarried couples who likely have very good reasons for not yet getting married and low-income parents who likely already go to great lengths to stretch their meager resources.
2. Teach couples about how external processes and factors, such as the transition to parenthood and living in poverty, are known to significantly affect relationship quality. This would help take some of the onus of relationship stress off of individual couples and help them recognize which aspects of their relationship

problems are socially patterned and therefore less likely to be solved by faulting their partners or breaking up.

3. Encourage couples to meaningfully and collectively talk about these shared stressors. Programs that provide a collective framework in which couples can learn to interpret their challenges as normal and directly related to the larger, external stressors of their lives—rather than relational or personal deficiencies—could be particularly effective for increasing relationship quality and stability. This is especially likely to be the case among couples who are more socially isolated.

Ultimately, any curricular component that helps couples recognize the common tendency to individualize relational and financial strain and externalize it in conflict with partners and kids would likely be helpful. These strategies are most likely to be effective if implemented over a longer period of time during which participants have ample opportunities to learn and practice empathic communication techniques in conversation with similarly situated couples. If implemented in this way, publicly supported relationship skills education could be a valuable social service in a society in which relationship stability and long-term marriage are increasingly becoming privileges of the most highly educated, those who are more economically secure, and those who can already easily access relationship support services.

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