

Systematic Review of the Impact Marriage and Relationship Programs

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Long Abstract

Given the changes in the past several decades in marriage and divorce rates, the rise of single parenting, and the effects these changes may have on children and adults, policymakers want to understand what is known about the effectiveness of interventions to improve marriage and prevent divorce, particularly for low-income families who may not be able to afford such services. Policymakers are poised to provide funding for marriage programs that will assist low-income families in building and maintaining healthy marriages. This review examines how marriage and relationship programs—defined as programs designed to improve the relationship between two people involved romantically—affect the quality of couples' relationships. The review will help inform policymakers about how marriage programs may affect demographic outcomes.

Many reviews of program evaluations have examined the effects of marriage programs. Some use a narrative format that presents an author's summary of a group of studies. Several reviews have also examined the effects of marriage programs using statistical meta-analysis to synthesize findings. Most conclude that these programs have positive outcomes for couples' relationships. The current review is a systematic review of evaluations of all types of marriage and relationship programs, drawing on research since 1960. It will determine an average impact of the studies on such measures as satisfaction, relationship quality, and communication.

The current review expands upon and differs from these previous reviews in three primary ways. First, it summarizes the studies using meta-analytic techniques to produce an average impact of the programs on selected outcome measures. Second, it includes evaluations of many different types of marriage programs: therapy programs, enrichment programs, education programs, and so on. Third, this review is a *systematic* review. In a systematic review the author states exactly how the review will be conducted in a protocol before beginning the work. The author reveals how he will locate studies for inclusion in the review, extract data and synthesize the results, and adjust for potential complications arising at any stage in the review process. Thus in being systematic, comprehensive in scope (covering all types of programs), and using meta-analytic techniques, this review will present an unbiased synthesis of the results of all high quality evaluations of interventions covering the broadest spectrum of marriage and relationship programs.

The search strategy for this review identifies evaluations of marriage and relationship programs conducted since 1960. Studies included in the current review must focus primarily on relationship improvement and include a control group that receives no treatment and is created by random assignment or with statistical methods that correct for differences between control and treatment groups. The search strategy includes academic databases of published literature, internet searches for published and unpublished research, manual searches of journals and books, and professional contacts (experts in the field of marriage and relationship programs).

The search yielded 12,832 abstracts: 6,037 from academic databases, and 6,795 from internet sites. After adding some studies from the manual searches and previous reviews, and then eliminating duplicates and any studies that did not meet inclusion criteria, we were left with 516 studies. Approximately 60 of these studies were chosen for analysis.

The studies included were published in the United States, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, and Australia. Most, however, came from the U.S. Studies were most likely to target married couples specifically, and a few included a mix of married and cohabiting couples, or premarital couples (i.e., couples intending to marry). The types of programs evaluated included therapy programs, marriage preparation programs, enhancement, enrichment, or encounter programs, communication skills building or education classes, and other types of programs with relationship improvement as a primary component. Most of the studies collected used random assignment.

Other data collected on the studies include information on the sample participants (sex, age, race, education level, income, and geography), intervention (program type, duration, frequency, and size), study (time from intervention to follow-up, mode of follow-up, and year of evaluation), and quality (randomization procedures, allocation concealment, sample selection bias, sample size, treatment and control group differences at baseline, control group contamination, attrition rates, and evaluator conflict of interest). Results from each study on participants' satisfaction, quality, and communication were presented in various forms by evaluators (e.g., means and standard deviations, t-test results, ANOVA results) and these are converted into the form of an effect size. The effect sizes across studies are combined to reveal an average effect for all studies.

The review presents an average effect size for selected outcomes for each program type (therapy, marriage preparation, enrichment, and education). The review will also examine how different factors (e.g., characteristics of the study, program, or sample population) affect outcomes. It will also explore many challenges related to conducting a review and using the results to answer questions about how policy may affect these important demographic outcomes. For example, there are challenges associated with categorizing interventions, comparing outcomes measured across studies, and assessing study quality. Aside from these methodological concerns, there is a more fundamental challenge of matching the review to the policy question. In this case, policymakers want to know the impact of marriage and relationship programs, especially on low-income populations. Yet this review assesses only *evaluations* of interventions, not interventions themselves. So the effects of programs not evaluated will not be included. Further, most of these programs do not target a low-income population. Despite these challenges, the review will present an unbiased, data-driven analysis of the impact of marriage and relationship programs on the relationship satisfaction of study participants.