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Low-Income Mothers in Marriage and Relationship Education:
Program Experiences and Beliefs about Marriage and Relationships

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Abstract

Marriage and Relationship Education programs are increasingly seen as helpful ways of strengthening intimate relationships, specifically those involving children. Although these programs have generally been found to be efficacious, more research is needed to understand the fit of programs aimed at low-income populations. Using grounded theory methodology, we examined low-income mothers' experiences in these programs, as well as how their perspectives on marriage and relationships affected their participation. Findings suggest these women value marriage and healthy relationships, but their ideals often conflict with their experiences. Also, they find the classes to be a place of support and relationship skill-building.

Keywords: marriage and relationship education, low-income mothers

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The typical family structure for American society has been changing. Over the last few decades less people are getting married, more couples are cohabitating, and the rate of divorce has fluctuated. Children are born into these various family configurations, and many have suggested that these changes are not always in children's best interests (Edin, Kefalas, & Reed, 2004). Due to the social and economic costs of some of these family issues, the government has begun to become more involved in addressing family functioning through the support of marriage and children. This has occurred as public policy makers have instituted ways to bring about more healthy marriages, especially among low-income populations (Ooms & Wilson, 2004; Myrick, Ooms, & Peterson, 2009). One of the avenues used to foster healthy marriages is the proliferation of marriage and relationship education (MRE) programs.

Larson (2004) describes marriage education as skills-based group programming to prevent and remedy marital distress. This includes education classes and marital support groups, which are sometimes labeled as marriage enrichment classes. Dion (2005) described MRE classes as programs that "provide support, information, and education about healthy relationships and marriage," that are often led by organizations looking to strengthen marriage in a certain region or population (p. 140). These programs can help "create full public awareness that 'marriage is basically a skills-based relationship'" (Howell, 2007, p. 45).

Ironically, although the government is hoping that MREs will help lower-income populations, these programs were primarily designed with White middle-class committed couples who were thought to follow a traditional mate selection pattern of dating, engagement,

marriage and then having children (Ooms & Wilson, 2004; Dion, 2005). Thus, a frequent critique of MREs is the need for more information about their effectiveness for low-income minority couples and parents (Ooms & Wilson, 2004; Dion, 2005; Hawkins, Carroll, Doherty, & Willoughby, 2004). Although emerging research is suggesting these programs are effective for these populations (e.g., Hawkins & Fackrell, 2010), it is likely that low-income couples and parents have different stressors than those of a White middle-class population, and therefore, may have different needs that could be met within an MRE program.

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of low-income mothers who have participated in MRE classes. Specifically, we sought to answer the following questions: 1) What is the experience of a low-income mother who takes MRE classes? 2) What are the expectations of low-income mothers in regard to marriage and relationships in general? And 3) What does this tell us about the potential needs for low-income mothers who may come to MRE classes? It was expected that exploring these questions would provide helpful information for those seeking to tailor MREs to better fit the lived experience of low-income mothers. This in turn may help address government concerns as well, including reducing public costs associated with government assistance and other programs to combat the negative effects of family fragmentation.

Low-Income Women and Marriage

Most women assume they will follow what has been referred to as a socially dictated order of life events and expectations, including getting married before one has children (Edin & Kefalas, 2005). However, many young women from working class backgrounds do not wait for marriage to have children, partially because it is difficult to find suitable men to marry (Manning, Trella, Lyons, & Du Toit, 2010). Economic stability is important for many from

lower income populations as a standard for marriage, and multiple children with multiple partners may be linked to this expectation in relationships (Dion, 2005). Cohabiting couples may think they need to be financially 'set' before they get married, and that marriage is not something to rush into irresponsibly (Edin, Kefalas, & Reed, 2004). Women may be hesitant to marry for fear of failure or divorce, which involves shame and disappointment from their family and community (Edin & Kefalas, 2005). In one study about 80% of mothers disagreed or strongly disagreed that having a child out of wedlock is embarrassing and hurts a woman's chances of getting married later on in life, and about 80% agreed a woman should have a child if she wants to, regardless of marital status (Cherlin, Cross-Barnet, Burton & Garret-Peters, 2008). Their results also showed very few women to be afraid or ashamed of getting divorced but rather were afraid of getting hurt in relationships in general, apart from marital status. Edin, Kefalas, and Reed (2004) found that although marriage rates have lowered, the concept of marriage has not lost its status as a cultural ideal within low-income and minority populations. It appears that among lower income populations, the meaning of marriage has shifted a great deal in recent decades (Manning, Trella, Lyons, & Du Toit, 2010).

Edin, Kefalas, and Reed (2004) describe the process of how couples choose to stay in a relationship and usually end up living together after becoming pregnant or when the child is born. They state "these cohabitations are often reminiscent of the shotgun marriages of old" (p. 1009). For many among low-income populations, cohabitation has become another expected life course step before marriage. During this period of cohabitation, couples appear to be in a double-bind of sorts. They are not tied by marriage, yet they expect one another to be faithful, trustworthy, and dependable. This lack of commitment to marriage leaves these couples available on the marriage market, which results in vulnerability to infidelity and mistrust. Gibson-Davis

(2008) indicates that differences between single or cohabitating mothers and married mothers may not be because of marriage itself, but rather because of positive partner selection in marriage. Lichter and Qian (2008) conducted a study on serial cohabitation and marriage and found that women who have participated in multiple cohabitations without marriage were less likely to get married. This was especially true for lower-income, disadvantaged women. Therefore, promoting marriage in MREs, which has been a goal in the past, might be a moot point for these women who struggle with economic and family constraints, as opposed to childless women who marry their first cohabitating partner.

MRE and Low-Income Populations

It is likely that individuals from low-income populations need MRE classes that are tailored to their needs. Dion (2005) asserts that low-income families must often deal with issues rarely addressed in standard MRE programming, such as sexual abuse, trust and commitment issues, and a lack of positive role models for marriage. Also, for biological fathers, co-residence seems to be just as important as getting married, which indicates a focus that is broader than just the marriage potential itself for these men (Gibson-Davis, 2008). It may be that a focus on parenting in healthy relationships may be more important in MRE programs with low-income parents than it is in a traditional curriculum.

There are a multitude of MRE programs and curricula, with few having been examined for effectiveness, especially regarding low-income families (Dion, 2005; Thompson, 2009). Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, and Pruett (2007) found that among those involved in MREs, “the issues that couples face are universal, but the group process is somewhat different [for diverse] groups” (p. 117). It is important for group leaders of classes to be familiar with current issues and

challenges among the participants, as well as be flexible in relating to different cultural barriers for healthy relationships (Larson, 2004; Hawkins, Carroll, Doherty, and Willoughby, 2004).

Myrick, Ooms, and Patterson (2009) discussed some of these ideas, such as using stories and examples taken from cultural beliefs and acculturation experiences and using participants' language to better accommodate culturally and economically diverse populations in MREs, specifically single mothers. These alterations however, will most likely take some time to disseminate from the discussion table out to the communities where MREs are taking place. Ooms and Wilson (2004) also give suggestions for improving the design of MREs for low-income families, which include creating realistic program goals, selecting a target audience, and reaching out to participants in a genuinely supportive way. New curricula and materials are being created as a supplement to the traditional topics of communication and conflict resolution in order to address the lower-income population; however, there are no studies thus far to examine their effectiveness. This research was designed to discover low-income mothers' views on marriage and relationships. In addition, we investigated what was helpful or beneficial to them in the MRE program in which they participated. By gaining understanding of these questions, relationship educators, policy-makers, agencies, and any other professionals associated with MRE programming can make adjustments to better accommodate and reach out to low-income mothers who could benefit from marriage and relationship education.

Methodology

Our goal in this project was to represent a specific population in as much detail as possible. We wanted to understand the insider's perspective of going to a relationship education class as a low-income mother. Therefore, we worked from a social constructivist epistemological stance and employed grounded theory methods to answer the research questions. We wanted to

“rely as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation” to present detail on this topic (Creswell, 2007, p. 20). These women have unique meanings for marriage, relationships, and MRE, and we analyzed their reports to inductively develop a substantive theory of meaning about this specific experience (Creswell, 2007). Our approach also was influenced by the critical theory perspective, which suggests this type of research can act in an advocacy role for participants, bringing their voices to a realm where they can be heard and make a difference (Daly, 2007). As part of our assertion that our knowledge claims are subjective, we recognize that as researchers we have power as we engaged with participants’ experiences. Nevertheless, our goal was to represent and interpret these women’s reality as accurately as possible.

Sample and Instruments

Low-income mothers were recruited to participate in focus groups by the director of an urban-located Healthy Marriage Development Program (HMDP) site and a research assistant from a large southwestern University. They asked for the list of all single mothers and all cohabitating mothers who had participated in an established PREP-based MRE program over the past year. Women were offered a gift card to participate, and ten mothers were randomly selected for each group. However, the list to choose from was generated by the director of the HMDP site, and was quite short (15 and 18 names respectively). Thus, it was difficult to determine how representative the participants of the focus groups were relative to all of the mothers who participated in the program. Even so, the mothers who participated in the two focus groups were quite diverse in age, ethnicity, number of children, and partnership histories. Since a major focus of the study was to understand low-income mothers’ views on marriage and relationships, regardless of their relationship status, two focus groups were conducted. One focus group was comprised of seven mothers who were single. Of those seven women, 4 women were

African-American, 2 were Hispanic, and 1 was White. The other focus group consisted of seven mothers (3 African-American, 3 Hispanic, 1 White) who were in cohabitating or married relationships when they participated in the MRE program. The focus groups were audio-taped and transcribed, and the transcripts were used for data analysis.

Procedures and Data Analysis Methods

We followed standard procedures for conducting grounded theory research as derived from Creswell (2007) and Corbin and Strauss (2008). First, we determined grounded theory to be the best fit for these research questions since we hoped to present the phenomena regarding marriage, cohabitation, and children outside of marriage among lower-income populations in a tentative theory. Second, interviews were conducted with the two focus groups in an effort to understand mothers' experiences in relationships and MRE programs. Then, the interviews were transcribed and read by a team of researchers to become familiar with the data. This began the process of open coding, which involved a close reading of the data that included labeling the text according to conceptual ideas and meanings. During the open coding process, questions were asked about the emerging phenomena, including: What caused this phenomenon to occur? (causal conditions), What strategies were used during the process? (strategies), and: What effect occurred? (consequences). Next, the multiple concepts and codes were organized into broader categories of information.

This process, known as axial coding, also involved refining the definitions of the concepts and deciding how they could fit together conceptually. In general, the analysis involved "fracturing" the data into many different types of codes, and then reconfiguring these segments into fewer categories, and ultimately a model. In each category there were subcategories that depicted the components of the broader category. In the final coding stage (selective coding) the

categories and concepts were arranged into a model with a core phenomenon, causal conditions, specific strategies, context and intervening conditions, and the consequences. From this visual diagram and coding, we were able to write a narrative storyline describing the phenomenon and connecting the concepts and themes that emerged throughout the analysis process.

Ethical Considerations and Reflexivity

We used rigorous grounded theory methods and upheld ethical research standards and practices (e.g., having IRB approval) throughout this process. We maintained confidentiality of study participants by using fictitious names in the transcripts and discarding the audio files used for transcription from the focus groups. Research consent forms were signed by all participants. We followed standard validation procedures for grounded theory. For example, the researchers attempted to approach the data with a “beginner’s mind,” without preconceived notions about this population or the constructs of interest. This involved acknowledging our roles as researchers, our gaps in understanding this population, and our assumptions about the process. For example, since marriage was a central construct in this study, the researchers also were reflexive in regard to their beliefs about marriage and relationships, and how this may play into the analytic process. Multiple coders were used, memos were kept of the analytic decisions, and the analysis was presented to an internal auditor for review.

Results

Early in the coding process it became clear that there were two primary types of themes emerging: the first was how these women were affected by the relationship education course they were in, and second was what they believed about marriage and relationships in general. There was an overall sense that the MRE classes were helpful and enjoyed by a majority of the women who participated; however, there also seemed to be a disbelief in or a hopeless feeling regarding

marriage. There appeared to be a dichotomy of thought when these women reflected about marriage, which was split into how marriage is in real life and how marriage is 'supposed to be.'

As the participants spoke about ideal marriages and their own realities regarding marriage and relationships, there seemed to be conflicting attitudes and beliefs. Some appeared to have a clear picture of what a good marriage would look like, but regarded the image as if it were unreachable. As we sought to further understand this dichotomous relationship, we found that the participants' identities and past experiences appeared to have a strong influence in their beliefs about marriage. These past experiences seemed to be preventing any hope for change or the possibility of ever being in an ideal marriage. Despite these past experiences, these women continued to express a desire to have a better life and to be in a good relationship. However, the wall put up by these past experiences seemed to prevent new ideas regarding marriage in these women's romantic relationships or conceptualizations of possible future relationships.

We determined that participants' past experiences could be divided into three major areas: 1) a narrative of survival and empowerment, 2) good and bad examples from participants' families-of-origin and close friends, and 3) betrayal by, and lack of trust in men. Being a survivor and an independent woman and mother seemed to result from a sense of making it through past broken relationships and family-of-origin experiences. Family-of-origin experiences of these participants were not made up of solely bad examples of marriage and relationships, but consisted of some good examples as well. The bad examples seemed to contribute to a lack of trust in men and hopeless beliefs about marriage, while the good examples appeared to help define what they considered to be ideal marriages. The general lack of trust in men seemed to be a consensus across the group of participants and appeared to be a belief generated from and woven throughout the past experiences of these women.

Figure 1 shows the final model with the categories and concepts arranged in relationship to each other. Each concept will be explained and illustrated by quotes from the participants.

[Figure 1 about Here]

MRE Experiences

As mentioned, all of the themes associated with these women's identity and past experiences led them to have certain beliefs and attitudes about relationships. These attitudes and beliefs were affected by the experience of the group process in the MRE. Many times these themes overlapped, as women discussed how what they believed intersected with what they learned or heard in the classes. In general, these experiences with the class were in line with what would be expected out of a relationship class, including the importance of social support, communication skills, and marital readiness.

Social support. Social support was a concept that described some of the reasons these women participated in the MRE classes. They expressed a need for peer support and appreciated how the process helped normalize their life experiences. Social support was also spoken of as means of survival for some of the single mothers. This theme was prominent among these women, despite their commonly expressed attitudes of independence. One woman liked knowing she was not alone and described the sensation of being among women in similar situations: “[I would think], That worked for me too . . . you're not by yourself, you're not alone.” Another woman talked about why she came to the MRE:

For me, it was just to be with other people that were like me, that could maybe give me some insight on ways to think of something where it doesn't seem like it's so overwhelming, or other ways to try certain things. My child's very, very

overwhelming. ...So I needed some other people's insight and input and to build friendships with other people.

One other participant spoke of the support she appreciated getting from couples who were married. She said, "Just listen to some of the things that the married people would do. Sometimes they could just sit back and...help you out a little bit . . . so I kind of know how to handle it when I get there."

Communication skills. The two major communication techniques or skills learned in the MREs as discussed by the participants were cycle de-escalation and speaker-listener. One woman spoke of her new communication skills: "I learned not to escalate. It's like 'sit down, and let's talk about it.'" Some participants used their new skills with each other, which one woman described as learning "to not escalate, because a lot of times you say things that are hurtful."

Other participants talked about their experiences after learning the speaker/listener technique. One woman said:

I thought I'd learn how to make my husband listen to me, and not just block me out all the time. It did help with that a little bit, because he doesn't listen. But after that, we kind of went through the exercises of the speaker/listener thing and he kind of got it.

Another participant talked about how she liked participating in the MRE, specifically learning new communication skills. She said, "What stuck out was the speaking/listening technique, and I really, really did like that. When I let them speak, and then I speak, and we just might be able to work it out." Another shared how she tends to have a lack of patience, but she has learned to understand others better by listening: "Listening gave me a better ear to be an opener, at least hearing what they were saying." Others talked about how they used the new techniques with

their children. One participant described her experience when she said, “I’ve used the listening with my kids, just give them the opportunity to do the same thing, listen to them, and then repeat it back, and make sure there’s eye contact, It’s had a drastic improvement on them.”

Marital readiness. Participants identified the classes as helping them learn things to help them know if they were ready for marriage. This included coming to grips with past experiences, learning necessary communication skills, and just general maturity. One woman said, “The first is love, in the relationship. And next is communication and trust.” Participants spoke of the need to implement their new skills before they were ready for future relationships. Another woman said, “Just because your heart tells you you are ready don’t mean you always are ready. You got to know that you are ready. If not, it’s just going to go down the drain.” One participant commented on the concept of being ready for marriage saying, “If there’s one thing I’ve learned from my past, I’m going to be ready...because it is pointless for you to be struggling already, then you get married to struggle some more.” Another woman talked about how the class helped her think about taking the necessary time to get to know a prospective partner:

[Some marriages have] the lying, the cheating, the deceit, the verbal or mental abuse. That’s why this class was recommended. You [need to] know someone for a certain amount of time, because after however many months . . . the facade is going to disappear, and then you’re going to see the things you didn’t see.

Ideals vs. Reality

The second primary theme from the analysis was the conflicting attitudes and beliefs about marriage. One woman spoke as if she was glad to take part in the MRE, but seemed to stand firm in her previous beliefs about marriage: “It sounds good, but I’m still going to walk out with the attitude that I’m not going to find Mr. Right.” Another participant expressed her desire

for a good marriage, but also her tentativeness about hoping for that: “I want to think that it would be better. I want to think I wouldn't question him. I want to believe that if he vowed to love me... he'd keep his word. And I wouldn't ever have to doubt him.” Many had this fear that a good or ideal marriage was unreachable. Others expressed hope, tempered with reality: “I believe there's somebody for everybody. I believe that God doesn't mean for me to be here and to be unhappy or for it to be such a struggle, for me or my son. There's something good for us.” One woman said, “They said until death do you part, that's your vows,” to which another replied, “They don't believe it, this is 'till you get and hire a lawyer.”

One woman did not seem to see a reason for getting married: “I think it's true about what you said, about living together...it's like what do I have to marry that person for, I already did everything else. I already live with that person. I already have kids. It's like, no.” Another described the culture of easy divorce as a contributor to the fragility of marriage:

Everybody can think that if they get married, the first thing that goes wrong, they can just split up and be with somebody else . . . They just want to say, ‘Let's just not get married. Let's just date.’ Something goes wrong, just go to the next one.

It's so easy and convenient with people nowadays to not be together, and not work on things, versus sticking it out.

Another participant discussed her justification for not believing in the ideal marriage when she said, “I don't think these days anybody's in it for that long of a haul. I think we live in a disposable world, and they view marriage as something as disposable. If it gets tough, don't worry about sticking it out.”

Some participants believed in marriage and had seen what they considered to be ideal, but they spoke as if that kind of marriage does not exist anymore. One woman talked about her parents' marriage:

They had us at an early age, but they were married. He always worked two or three jobs just so she would not have to work, and I thought that was beautiful in itself. And they don't make men like that [anymore].

Some participants still held strong to their beliefs about finding one's true love and having a dream wedding. One woman talked about possible future plans and said, "We would like to get married in a church, and have a nice big wedding with family and stuff. We don't have that money right now."

Identity and Past Experiences

Past experiences and their impact on these women's identities seemed to be the key to understanding their conflicting views about marriage. These past experiences generally were not of good memories or outcomes although positive things were mentioned at times. Past experiences were often described as formative, having a major influence on the ways in which these women saw themselves and their relationship values. For this reason this category includes many concepts that were interactive – both having an identity component, as well as a past experience component. The following concepts include themes that were derived from family-of-origin influences as well as past relationships, and these concepts seemed to be the major contributing factors to a general lack of trust in men. 'Lack of trust' was made into a separate concept simply because there was such a wealth of information from these women expressing this attitude; however, all of the concepts making up the participants' identities and past experiences tended to overlap and were closely connected to one another.

Lack of trust. This generally centered around a mistrust of men, which seemed to contribute to a males-versus-females attitude that was common in much of the discussion. Many participants told stories in which men could not be trusted, including stories of infidelity among friends: “[I told my friend], ‘We know this dude cheating on you . . . when he calls you and says, ‘Where are you?’ . . . [he’s] finding out where you are--how long you’re going to be there, so [he can] cover his tracks.’” Another woman told a story about a friend in a bad situation:

My friend was in a really bad marriage...and she tells me, "Oh, [husband], he got a new car" and I drive over to her house one day, and I'm seeing this old ...Chevy station wagon... and I said "Oh good, he brought home the body mobile!" She's like, "What?" I said, yeah he finally got something big enough to haul off your carcass in when he kills you!" ... [he] had a two million dollar life insurance policy out on her. He was literally trying to kill her!

In general there was an attitude that men could not be trusted with anything. Due to the overall mistrust in men, many of these women seemed to have built up protective mechanisms, which had a gender-biased approach. One woman had a ‘baseball policy’ that she described as “Three strikes, you’re out.” Others had a general attitude that men needed help and should be the ones to make improvements in their lives. One of the participants expressed a desire for her significant-other to change: “[I have] been trying to teach him some things, but maybe he’ll learn.” It was frequently mentioned that men need to be in the classes. One woman said, “I was in a relationship. He’s a wonderful person, but when it comes to relationships, he needs about five classes.” Another participant spoke about her significant-other and said, “I think if [Partner] could go to six classes for six months, yeah we could get married.”

One woman felt her past relationships caused her to “build up a brick wall” that would not be easily taken down. Another shared her experiences of being in an abusive relationship and how that opened her eyes to what she viewed as the reality of relationships. She said, “I’ve had some real doozies. I’ve had my cheekbone crushed, blood coming out of my ear, and they make you feel like you’re getting exactly what you deserve.”

Survivor/Empowerment. Many, if not all, of these women showed an independent, survivor-type of worldview and expressed their strength and perseverance through their stories and examples from their mothers or others who were also survivors. One woman spoke of her experiences as a child:

When I was younger, my mom was married; you know I used to see her go through so much with her husband. One time he literally just shot at her, and just burned and missed her this much just past her shoulder and hit the window...I refuse to go through that when I get married . . . And then when you start dating, and you have that first confrontation, it's just done. Man, I'm going through the same thing my momma went through, and I was like I'm not going to do that! I let you go because you are killing me!

One participant identified with her mother who she saw as a survivor: “My momma was a single parent, she raised three of us, and she did an excellent job.” Another saw the same: “I run everything, because when I grew up, my mom ran everything.” One participant expressed a freedom attached with being an independent woman when she said, “If you had a husband you’d have to answer to someone. You can’t, that’s how my momma is. She’s like, ‘I don’t feel like answering to anybody, I just want to do what I want to do.’” One other woman discussed the lack of need for marriage because of her independence:

You have a lot of single parents that raise their children on they own, and they saw that their mothers could do it, so they did it. They saw their fathers do it, so they feel like they could do it, so, why get married? Why waste that time and that money?

Empowerment was a concept that not only emerged in relation to the concept of a survivor narrative, but also as one of the take-away points from the MRE for these women. Empowerment in this context deals with independence, exercising self-control, and not settling for less than what these women felt they want and deserve. One mother expressed her stance about her life:

I have to change my life for my son, and I know that I can -- I cannot just be out thinking I'm having fun. You can't just do that with anybody. You have to make sure that you want this with this person, and that you're going to -- and this person's going to be there too...I know that I have to be there for my child, because my mom was there for me, and my son deserves to have a mom just as good, if not better. I could never be as good as my mom, but she raised me to know that I have to -- and he deserves that... ..I can't take it for granted -- be so selfish -- I have to be serious. You have to grow up. You've got to be focused.

Another woman talked about how she used to think she needed to be in a relationship but has learned that she cannot settle simply because she needs help raising her children. She said, "My whole thing was, my expectations, not to settle, and not just go for anything... I want somebody to help me...I feel like I'm struggling with these two kids, I need some help. But just not to settle."

Bad examples. Although many women drew strength from examples they witnessed in their lives, many of them similarly saw bad examples they did not want to have in their lives.

They described hurtful patterns or cycles that they wanted to avoid in their own families. One woman said:

All my friends, they're raised in families where it's only one parent, and it's their mom. I have more examples of bad relationships than good ones. So, for me like you said, it's -- when you do stuff in front of your kids, they're paying attention...if they see nothing else, they're going to assume it's normal.

Another woman said: "My grandmother is divorced. My mother is divorced. And I'm divorced. It's like one chain." One participant seemed to feel as if the bad patterns of previous generations were tainting others' views of her as a mother: "His mom is so used to having to raise grandkids, she keeps thinking I'm going to mess up, and she's going to have raise them."

One of the most important aspects about breaking these bad patterns was that these mothers wanted a better life and a better example for their children. One mother stated this clearly by saying, "I'm trying to make good examples for my daughter...so that way she doesn't have to fall in the habit of following all the bad examples." Another woman talked about the importance of showing her daughter a good example of marriage. She said:

Me and her dad would have to be able to show a good example. Because what's the point of being married, if you're going through the same drama you had when you weren't married? You're just showing them, 'hey, here's a bad situation. But now we're stuck together until we can hem out some money for a divorce.' So, I want to make sure that if I get married, I'm going to give her a good example. And she'll know, 'well hey, this is secure'.

Good examples. Participants also talked about good examples from their families-of-origin. These good examples seemed to be linked with what they consider to be ideal marriages.

One woman shared about her grandparents' marriage and said, "My grandmother always tells me, she's been married for fifty-three years, and she said her marriage was not perfect the whole fifty-three. It took awhile for them to get to know each other." Another talked about how her parents had a good marriage when she was growing up: "That's how I was raised, with my mom and my dad.... [They] have this thing, that's what I want for my kids." Speaking of the ideal marriage her parents had, another woman said:

I think my parents were in an ideal marriage, because he was old fashioned . . . and he made the money. She stayed at home. He didn't want anyone else keeping us. And he would come home. They don't make men like that anymore -- he would come and give her his whole paycheck, and she paid all the bills, and she did all the cooking, and she did all the ironing, and she did all the cleaning. And in his last days...she sat by his side, 100%. She never left him.

One of the 'side effects' of having good examples, that in turn portrayed an ideal marriage to these women, is the concept of having expected timelines for their lives. It seemed that many of these women consider themselves to have broken this expected chain of life events, which has contributed to this feeling of hopelessness toward marriage. It is as if some have the attitude of—"I've messed up, now what?" One participant talked about her expectations that had been broken when she said, "Well, because my ideal marriage would be to be married to the guy that fathered my kids and we'd be in love, and it seems like it's washed down the drain." Another woman talked about how her mother had set expectations for her to not cohabitate before marriage, but that society seems to have changed the timeline making it "so easy for us to live together, and be done with it, and not get married."

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the experience of low-income mothers who participated in MRE classes. According to our findings, the major benefits of MRE classes to low-income mothers are social support, communication skill-building, and learning about marital readiness. These findings are similar to Dion's (2005) in that social support is a key aspect of MREs, especially when holding classes with members of similar backgrounds and life stages. The social support of the MRE group not only helped to normalize participants' experiences but encouraged them with help from one another. The communication skill-building seems to be a primary piece in most MREs, as mentioned by Larson (2004). Although this may seem common in most relationship classes, communication skill-building continues to be an important aspect in working on and maintaining stable relationships. The MRE classes these mothers participated in also seemed to affirm their beliefs about marital readiness. There seemed to be a consensus in this group of women that being ready—physically, emotionally, and financially—for marriage is of vast importance, especially to avoid repeating mistakes from their pasts.

We found that the participants had mixed beliefs and attitudes regarding their expectations about marriage. There appeared to be conflicting thoughts about what an ideal marriage looks like and what a real marriage is. Although some of these women were able to describe their ideal marriage, few, if any, seemed to think it was possible. The participants displayed an overwhelming lack of trust in men, which seemed to originate from past experiences in romantic relationships and/or in their families-of-origin. Any good examples these women were shown from their families and friends were few but appeared to be held as ideal, while the bad examples were more plentiful and were held as the standard or the reality of marriage—a reality most did not want.

Implications for MRE Programming

This study confirms that social support, communication skill-building, and discussing marital readiness are important components in curricula presented to low-income women. However, other areas regarding the participants' views and beliefs about marriage and relationships could be addressed as well. Also, it may be helpful to address the general lack of trust in men with these women, which could involve being aware of where it comes from and how to cope with this experience, as well as how this lack of trust effects the interactions in current and future relationships. There are empowering aspects of MREs that seem to have been helpful to these women, and we suggest empowerment be a more central aspect of these classes. With all the past experiences discussed by these women, including good and bad examples of relationships, we see a need for empowerment of these women to break bad cycles and family-of-origin patterns and persevere in pursuing good examples.

Many MRE curricula emphasize the importance of strengthening communication and conflict resolution skills. Some also highlight the importance of normalizing the realities of long-term committed relationships, emphasizing that the novelty of early stage love and infatuation will fade over time and different types of love enter into the relationship as couples grow closer together. The participants in the current MRE highlighted the differences between the ideal marriage, or the fantasy of what marriage could be, against the reality of their situations, which involves the fact that there were very few long-term committed love relationships around them upon which to model their own relationships. Given the reported dismal outlook of long-term (marital) loving relationships, it is not surprising most of these women felt the ideal was out of reach.

MRE educators targeting this population would be wise to devote specific time and attention to discussing the ideal vs. realistic images of long-term committed loving relationships.

We recommend an infusion of these discussions so that participants in this particular demographic understand that the facilitators have a firm grasp of the realities of their situation. We also recommend that facilitators come from the same social and ethnic group as the majority of the participants so that any barriers associated with understanding the cultural "lay of the land" can be minimized. Facilitators should also be "believers" in the cause. They should be people who hold out hope that the ideal, or that a significant portion of the "ideal" can be achieved and that there is a real benefit to women and children who have access to a healthy love relationship. However, we caution that when providing MRE for people in this particular demographic (lower-income mothers), simply highlighting the fact that there is a chasm between the "ideal" and the "realistic" is not enough.

Our review of the data indicated that a considerable hurdle for many of these women is a lack of trust in men. Both personal experiences, as well as observing family members' experiences with men, resulted in decreased expectations from men in committed relationships. There might be benefit in translating key elements of relational therapeutic models, such as Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) to an MRE format for individuals in this particular demographic where "lack of trust" was expressed as a major barrier to forming and sustaining healthy long-term love relationships. Application of EFT in an MRE format might focus on educating participants about love relationships and attachment patterns, how these patterns are formed, and how they become set in our minds and are applied to our everyday interactions with loved ones (e.g., working models). Additionally, participants could learn how attachment injuries occur and how couples can rise above these injuries in a safe and healing environment in order to create stronger and longer lasting connections with one another.

Limitations and Future Directions

The data used for this study consisted of information gathered as a part of a grant and later analyzed. We were limited in our ability to select participants based on potential for “theoretical sampling” (Strauss & Corbin, 2008) and were also limited to the focus group data, rather than following up with typical member checking procedures with participants. Another limitation was the small number of participants in the focus groups. Grounded theory methodology typically suggests that studies have 20-30 participants, and we were short of that. It would obviously be helpful to replicate these types of interviews with other low-income mothers to see if their experiences and expectations were similar to those in this study.

An additional limitation was the group dynamics during the focus groups. It is always a risk in focus groups that the “group mentality” during data collection will shape the data in regard to the comfort level of the group members to express themselves genuinely (e.g., Busby et al., 2006). In future research, it could also be helpful to measure what stage of change the participants are in when beginning an MRE in order to determine its effectiveness based on whether the participants are genuinely ready and open for changes in their lives. Despite these limitations, the voices of these women are helpful to hear and are important for those who will work with them.

The sampling methods for this study posed a risk to internal validity. One of the focus groups was conducted with single mothers while the other focus group consisted of mothers who identified as being “in a relationship” with most in cohabitating relationships. The common theme for both groups, however, was that they all qualified as “low-income,” and each woman was identified as part of a “minority” population. It is possible that these mothers have very different experiences of the world and love relationships. However, the participants' shared experiences of being minority women who are embedded in a culture of poverty was of primary

concern for this study. We know so little about low-income minorities' experiences in MREs that this study still contributes to our knowledge about how to engage this population and provides some hope that MREs can be a suitable place for these women to find support and gain skills that can benefit them in current and future relationships. Future research should emphasize more homogeneity among participants to combat this threat to internal validity.

One of the findings of this study that was mentioned in a cursory manner was that some of these mothers had applied the skills they had acquired in the MRE to interactions with their children. This is similar to a finding discovered by Daire et al (in press) who discovered that a group of older Hispanic participants in an MRE reported sharing their new communication skills and knowledge with their adult children who were experiencing relational distress. It is too early to declare with any confidence that the MRE is having a "ripple effect" in affecting the relationships between parents and children, but this is something that needs to be attended to in future research. Are there ripple effects that occur for people who receive MREs? If so, how great are these (how much information is transferred)? and, In what direction do they travel (who specifically benefits)? Applying systems or other relational theories could be valuable in addressing these questions.

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Figure 1 – Low Income Mother’s Experiences with MRE Classes

