Differential Benefits of Marriage and Relationship Education on Post-Divorce Individuals

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Introduction & Purpose
Within the United States and Western Europe, the majority of individuals who experience divorce, ultimately go on to subsequently re-couple either through remarriage or cohabitation (Beamle & Mosher, 2002, Xu, Hudspeer, & Bartkowski, 2006). Cohabitation among never-married couples has been found to be linked to higher rates of marital dissolution (Cohun & Kleinbaum, 2002), and lower rates of marital satisfaction and couple quality (Brown & Booth, 1996; Skinner, Bahr, Crane & Call, 2002) compared to couples who do not cohabitate prior to their first marriage. These differences appear to be more pronounced for couples who were not engaged prior to cohabitation (Stanley, Brides, Amato, Markman & Johnson, 2000). While relatively less research has examined differences in couple quality in those individuals who are in non-marital romantic relationships following divorce and their remarried counterparts (Xu, Hudspeer & Bartkowski, 2006).

Relationship and Marriage Education (RME) has been found to be associated with improvements in couple quality and relationship satisfaction (Hawkings, Blanchard, Baldwin, & Faccett, 2008); however, the examination of RME effects has been generally limited to broader samples of participants. Experiences in RME programs may vary depending on relationship status. Further, as research has suggested that romantic relationships following a divorce may be less stable and at higher risk for dissolution, RME may be particularly beneficial for post-divorce relationships. Using a sample of RME participants, this study explores differences between remarried, post-divorce-cohabiting, and post-divorce-dating individuals in their perceptions of their relationship quality prior to starting RME, and examines differences in change following participation.

Method
The analytic sample represents a subsample from the larger Alabama Community Healthy Marriage Initiative (n = 4753). This subsample included 553 individuals who reported being in a romantic relationships and a history of a single divorce. Of these 553 individuals, 314 (56.8%) had remarried following their divorce, 16 (2.9%) were cohabitating with a romantic partner, and 113 (20.2%) were dating, but not cohabitating.

Sample
Gender: Female: n = 378 (68.4%)
Male: n = 175 (31.6%)
Race: African-American: n = 173 (31.9%)
European-American: n = 316 (65.3%)
Other: n = 1 (0.2%)
Age: M = 38.5 years old (Median = 37; range: 20-70)
Family income: $33,000 or less: n = 150 (30.4%)
$44,000-89,999: n = 174 (34.5%)
$90,000 or more: n = 94 (18.3%)
$40,000 or more: n = 178 (35.7%)

Procedure
Adults participated in a minimum of 6 group educational sessions focused on building knowledge and skills for healthy couple relationships and marriages. Participants were able to attend the program individually or with their romantic partner/spouse. 202 participants attended the RME classes with their partner. Attendance with partner varied across relationship status, (r(212) = .83, p < .001), with 20% of the remarried participants, 24% of the cohabitating participants and 8.8% of the dating participants attending with their romantic partner. Due to dependence and systematic variations across relationship status, attending with a partner was used as a covariate in analyses.

Results
Hypothesis 1. Prior to participation in RME classes, it was hypothesized that remarried participants will show higher levels of couple quality, satisfaction, confidence, dedication, stability, and trust in their relationship compared to the post-divorce-dating participants.

Hypothesis 2 was explored using a series of ANCOVAs, with relationship status as the dependent variable, the 7 aspects of couple quality as the dependent variables and attendance status as a covariate.

Prior to participation in the MRE program, remarried participants reported significantly higher couple quality on all measures of couple functioning across their relationship. Remarried individuals reported significantly higher levels of couple quality, Relationship Confidence, Relationship Dedication, Stability, and Trust in their relationship compared to individuals in dating relationships, and significantly higher ratings than cohabitating individuals on measures of Couple Satisfaction, Relationship Confidence, Relationship Dedication, and Stability. Cohabitating participants reported significantly higher levels of Relationship Dedication, and Trust compared to participants in dating relationships. Finally, dating participants reported significantly higher levels of Stability than cohabitating participants.

Table 1. Differences in perceptions of couple relationship prior to start of RME program.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Remarried</th>
<th>Cohabiting</th>
<th>Dating</th>
<th>p-Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Couple Quality</td>
<td>3.83 (1.28)</td>
<td>3.21 (1.36)</td>
<td>2.83 (1.35)</td>
<td>.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Confidence</td>
<td>3.57 (1.23)</td>
<td>3.07 (1.29)</td>
<td>2.54 (1.25)</td>
<td>.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likelihood of Stability</td>
<td>3.59 (1.29)</td>
<td>3.12 (1.33)</td>
<td>2.78 (1.35)</td>
<td>.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Couple Functioning</td>
<td>3.50 (1.27)</td>
<td>2.95 (1.33)</td>
<td>2.52 (1.32)</td>
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</tr>
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As was hypothesized, individuals who had remarried following a divorce reported significantly higher levels of couple quality, satisfaction, confidence, dedication, stability, and trust in their relationship compared to the post-divorce-dating participants.

Table 2. Changes in couple functioning following completion of RME.

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For one aspect of couple functioning, Likelihood of Stability, there was a significant interaction between relationship status and time, such that participants in cohabitating relationships showed greater gains in their sense of the relationship stability compared to remarried participants, F(2,171) = 5.77; p < .001. There was no significant change in ratings of stability for dating participants.

Summary of Findings & Discussion
The results of this study suggest that while post-divorce relationship status may lead to variations in initial perceptions of the couple relationship, patterns of changes following RME participation, are similar for remarried, cohabitating or dating participants.

As was hypothesized, individuals who had remarried following a divorce reported the highest levels of couple functioning at the start of the RME classes. Remarried participants reported being more satisfied, confident and dedicated to their relationship than either dating or cohabitating participants. Both cohabitating and remarried participants indicated higher quality and trust in their relationship compared to dating individuals.

Generally all participants showed similar patterns of change in their perceptions of their relationship following RME attendance, with one exception. Interestingly, participants who were cohabitating with their partners following divorce showed greater gain in their sense of relationship stability, suggesting that the skills taught in RME may be particularly beneficial to cohabitating individuals who may feel unsure about the stability of their non-married relationship.

Relationship education appears to be beneficial for a variety of individuals, and can lead to gains in post-divorce couple functioning regardless of current relationship status. Educators can feel more confident to recruit diverse samples of participants, as the skills and information taught in RME programs may have benefits to many different types of individuals.
References


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