Examining Change in Parenting Dimensions in Relation to Change in Couple Dimensions

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Introduction & Purpose

The Healthy Marriage Initiative is described as child-centered based on the empirical research that indicates efforts to strengthen relationships and marriages, enhance partner stability, and reduce divorce will directly and indirectly benefit child well-being (Brotherson & Duncan, 2004). The quality of the couple relationship is a critical factor in the environment in which children develop (e.g., Cowan & Cowan, 2001). Research has shown that the marital relationship serves as the foundation for family cohesion and contributes to the overall quality of family life (Erel & Burman, 1993). Marital relationship processes, particularly marital conflict, have been shown to negatively affect children’s and adolescent’s well-being and adjustment (Cummings & Davies, 1994). Indirect or “spillover” models, examining the link between couple conflict and parent involvement and parenting practices (Grych & Fincham, 2002), propose that conflict, problem behaviors, and affective nature of the parenting relationship help explain the link between couple conflict and child adjustment (Fincham, Grych, & Osborne, 1994). Thus, educational efforts to strengthen the couple relationship (i.e., Relationship/Marriage Education [RME]) may positively affect the co-parenting relationship and dimensions of parenting and, in turn, can promote child well-being. Limited intervention research testing this assumption exists (Cowan & Cowan, 2003). The current study, using a large, diverse sample RME participants, examines the extent to which several dimensions of parenting (co-parenting conflict, parental involvement, and positive parenting practices) change after participation in RME in relation to changes in dimensions of couple functioning, and whether these changes differ by sex, race, and marital status.

Method

Sample
N = 524 adult parents (48.5% female, 15.5% male)
Race: 53% African American, 49% European American
Age: Mean of 35 years old (Median = 34; range = 15-72)
Relationship Status: 35% married; 60% non-married
Family income: $25,000 or less (52.5%), $25,000-$74,999 (27%), & income > $75,000 (6.5%)

Procedure
Adults participated across 8 sites in a minimum of 6 group educational sessions focused on building knowledge and skills for healthy couple relationships and marriages.

Measures

Dependent Variables
Co-parenting Conflict
Positive Parenting
Parent Involvement

Predictor Variables
Variables and Reference
Couple Quality
Negative Interactions
Positive Interactions

Hypothesis 1: Greater change in couple functioning post-program will be associated with greater change in parenting. Results indicate that, controlling for all else in the model, greater improvements in Positive Couple Behaviors are associated with greater improvements in Parental Involvement and Positive Parenting; greater reductions in Negative Interactions are associated with greater reductions in Co-Parenting Conflict; greater improvements in Couple Quality is associated with greater reductions in Parent Involvement

Chi-square was significant 765.875 (df = 43; p < .000), CFI = .92 and RMSEA = .047.

Table 1: Unstandardized and standardized coefficients between the latent constructs for the full model

Research Question 2: Because no information exists regarding the impact of race and marital status, the following was explored: How do participant characteristics, specifically, race and marital status, affect the links between changes in couple functioning and changes in parenting?

Models were fit simultaneously for European Americans and African Americans: χ2 = 1905.45 (df = 846; p < .000), CFI = .90 and RMSEA = .04. Differences were found for the link between change in negative couple behavior and change in parent involvement. European Americans had a negative relationship between change in negative couple behavior and parent involvement; the path was n/s for African Americans.

Models were fit simultaneously for married and nonmarried parents: χ2 = 1496.24 (df=846; p < .000), CFI = .90 and RMSEA = .04.

No significant differences for model paths between married and non-married parents were found.

Summary of Findings & Discussion

The primary contribution of this study is the extension of the current RME evaluation research and the documentation of a link between change over time in couple dimensions and change over time in parenting dimensions. This is the first application of RME programs using a large, diverse sample to apply these theoretical assumptions to study design and to examine the relative contribution of changes in couple dimensions as predictors of changes in parenting dimensions among RME program participants. In the current study, changes in the couple domain were found to be associated with the amount of changes in the parenting domain over the same period of time. While theoretically, we view this as “spillover”: further testing with multiple timepoints will be better able to examine direction of effects.

For the full sample, a pattern of stronger links was found between conceptually similar dimensions of couple functioning and parenting.

- The strongest predictor of changes in positive parenting behaviors is change in positive couple behaviors.
- The strongest predictor of change in co-parenting conflict is change in negative/conflictual couple behaviors.
- The strongest predictor of changes in parent involvement is change in positive couple behaviors.
- We are exploring the meaning of the positive change in couple quality as a predictor of negative change in parent involvement. It may be that enhanced focus on the couple relationship reduces some time spent in parenting (i.e., this measure assesses caretaking activities).

This study expands existing research further by examining how sex, race, and marital status, influence the relationships tested. These investigations revealed few differences. However, these types of examinations of varying experiences within group based on demographic characteristics and context can be useful in further refining our empirical understanding of change over time and further refining program design. Practical implications:
- RME may be a useful prevention tool that can enhance not only the adult couple relationship, but also, the co-parenting and the parent-child relationship, and subsequently, child well-being.
- RME programs may suggest enhancement of parenting in both marketing and requests for funding for programs.
- Parent educators may want to consider a “hybrid” approach and the inclusion of couple relationship skill training to enhance parenting outcomes.

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