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NHMRC June 2010 Webinar Frequently Asked Questions

**From Research to Practice, Examining New Findings on
Marriage and Relationship Education Programs**

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1. Do you have any suggestions for submitting findings to journals that are friendly to studies that lack rigorous control groups?

Alan Hawkins: Yes, these journals do exist. However, it would be best to discuss this one on one with me. Please email me at Hawkins@byu.edu.

2. In regards to the BSF studies, what did the domestic violence screening include?

Rob Wood: Each of the eight programs developed their own domestic violence protocol by working with a local domestic violence organization, so each was somewhat different from the others. The protocols included screening out couples that seemed to have a harmful type of domestic violence that could be exacerbated by the program. They also included instructions on what to do in the event that a domestic violence issue emerges while the couple is in the program.

3. How did the Mathematica study measure and control for control group access to other family support services?

Rob Wood: In a random assignment evaluation of this sort it is not possible to keep control group couples from having access to other, similar programs. Therefore, it is true that some of the control group did participate in other kinds of relationship skills programs. However, this occurred infrequently

since these types of programs are not that common. Also, the BSF intervention was a particularly intensive intervention. Therefore, couples in the control group who participated in another relationship education program did not typically receive as intensive an intervention as the BSF couples. Finally, the goal of the study was to compare couples who received the BSF intervention to couples who were not offered this particular intervention, not to couples who had no relationship education of any sort.

4. Were there any significant differences at time one on outcome measures between the treatment and control groups in the Mathematica study?

Rob Wood: There was not a significant difference at time one. The baseline characteristics between the two groups were very closely aligned. Also, researchers performed some Cisco modeling to adjust for any small differences that may have existed.

5. Since all of the sites except for the Oklahoma site had very low attendance rates, could there have been an implementation problem with the program that prevented the Mathematica study from showing positive outcomes?

Rob Wood: This is a reasonable comment, since it is necessary for program providers and evaluators to determine if the program is able to achieve a

high attendance rate. For instance, a program may not be able to achieve high attendance rates for five months, but might have more success over a shorter timeframe.

6. Did the Mathematica evaluators find any data to suggest that an experienced program could produce more positive results than a new program?

Rob Wood: The researchers did not find substantial differences between experienced and new programs.

7. Is it possible that the leaders at the Oklahoma BSF site had more clinical experience or more regularly consistent supervision or consultation?

Rob Wood: The amount of clinical experience and regularly consistent supervision can make a very large difference in the leader's ease of keeping up his or her enthusiasm, managing difficult issues of participant couples, and maintaining fidelity to the model. The facilitators at the Oklahoma site may have had increased levels of experience and supervision due to the large scale of the program (two thousand couples were recruited for the site and about half that amount participated in the program during the study).

8. Did the programs in both studies develop a marketing plan prior to starting their programs? If so, was a professional or marketing specialist involved? Do you have any insight or knowledge in regards to that?

Jennifer Miller Gaubert: SHM sites did write marketing plans or outreach and recruitment plans before the programs began. They were done in consultation with folks from Public Strategies who had a lot of experience from BSF and are also averse in public relations.

9. What is the modal (most common) number of workshops or hours attended by couples in your meta-analysis? Is there a point where couples' relationships deteriorated from too many hours of education?

Alan Hawkins: There is not an exact modal number for program dosage. The dosages varied quite a bit among the various programs in the BSF study, with the average program providing about 20 hours of relationship education. This is much greater than the 12 hours provided by the typical middle-class program.

The number of studies that have looked at lower incomes samples is not enough for us to make a judgment about whether there is a burnout effect that occurs after a certain number of hours. However, there is the possibility that the highest dosage programs might actually tend to have a lower impact than programs with shorter dosages. In the BSF study, for example, the programs with the most condensed curricula seemed to have better results.

Researchers are going to need to pay attention to the dosages in the future, in order to discern whether there really is an optimal range of dosages. This range would ostensibly provide participants with the opportunity to learn and practice their new skills, but would not overwhelm participants so that they start tuning out the information.

10. How does the level of facilitator empathy and the ability to validate the couple being culturally competent affect outcomes?

Alan Hawkins: From my meta-analysis, I was not able to code enough programmatic information to be able to make this determination. I am examining a few of those factors in my broader meta-analysis and hope to have those results by the end of the summer. Thus far I have seen a few studies that have suggested that certain factors do not affect outcomes that were previously thought to affect outcomes. For instance, it has not been shown to matter whether the instructor is male or female or whether the instructor has the same race/ethnicity as the participants.

I also have not seen research on whether facilitator empathy and clinical expertise affect outcomes, although in all likelihood these two factors do play a role in participant outcomes. Also important towards achieving positive outcomes is the facilitator's ability to actively engage participants for a two or three hour presentation.

11. Is there anything that would indicate that social education programs are more effective at a younger age?

Alan Hawkins: There needs to be better research performed on this question. On the one hand it seems that the sooner young people are exposed to relationship education, the more effect it will have on them as they grow into adults. On the other hand, young people are further away from forming close, intimate, romantic relationships that could lead to marriage. It therefore may be more difficult for young

people to understand the importance of learning relationship skills.

12. Was journaling used as an intervention by any of the couples?

Rob Wood and Jennifer Miller Gaubert: It was not a technique that was used in any of the four SHM curricula or any of the BSF curricula.

13. What is Dr. Hawkins' theory on what may have led to the poor overall results of the BSF treatment group, i.e. increased awareness of what makes for a good relationship. What may the intervention be missing?

Alan Hawkins: It may be difficult to know whether the program caused some of the negative outcomes found in the Mathematica study, such as the termination of the relationship, intimate partner violence, and lower relationship quality. Another possibility is that the educational experience for those individuals may have created more awareness of relationship problems or willingness to report them and more willingness to terminate the relationship. Another perspective actually suggests that these are positive outcomes for the program as opposed to negative outcomes.

Rob Wood: The effects are probably the result of the program since it is a random assignment study. For instance, moms in the program group were probably not more sensitized to the issues and therefore more likely to report them, since this outcome was only found in one site. Therefore,

there is probably not a self-reporting bias among participants in the study group.

The fact that these negative outcomes occurred at the Baltimore site may stem from the fact that the study group couples at that site had more tenuous relationships than couples at the other sites. These circumstances emerged once couples began focusing on the quality of their relationships, whereas

previously it remained undisclosed. Therefore the study may actually encourage couples to break up, once they have evaluated their relationship quality and judged it to be poor.

One fact that emerged from this issue is that the evaluators need to define what constitutes a positive and negative outcome (i.e. Can couples ending their poor quality relationships constitute a positive outcome?)