

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## TRENDS IN SERVICE DELIVERY

### Exploring the Role of Partners and Spouses in the Decisions of Social Service Clients

by M. Robin Dion

*Although social service programs have historically tended to focus on low-income parents as individuals, many of these parents have an intimate partner or spouse. This study investigated the role of partners and spouses in the decision-making processes of social service clients. Direct observation of clients' interactions with their partners/spouses<sup>1</sup> showed that whether married or unmarried, low-income individuals in couple relationships affect each other's decision-making behavior in ways similar to those in married, middle-class families. The observed influence of partners may extend to program-related decisions such as take-up, participation, and behavior change. More research is needed to confirm these findings and to determine whether and under what circumstances partners are likely to undermine or support the program-related behavior and decisions of social service clients. The study findings suggest that it may be important to account for the potential influence of a client's partner in designing, delivering, and evaluating program services.*

#### Why Study the Influence of Partners?

Although the decisions and actions of individuals may be influenced directly or indirectly by spouses or intimate partners, social services for low-income families tend to focus primarily on individual parents rather than both parents. From employment assistance and asset development to early childhood education, many programs have requirements for, or expectations of, participants but do not consider the needs, concerns, or influence of a spouse or partner in developing plans with, or requiring certain actions from, participants. Many social service programs for

## KEY RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In what ways, if at all, might clients of social service programs be influenced by the behavior, desires, and input of their partners when making decisions?

What role is played by contextual factors (such as which partner has most control of the couples' economic resources) in the decision-making processes of low-income couples?

To what extent might it be useful, in promoting positive program outcomes, to take the presence and influence of partners into account?

low-income families do not even consider whether the service recipient is in a couple relationship (e.g., married, cohabiting, or seriously dating).

Research involving middle-income families has found that during interaction, marital partners affect each other's behavior in important ways that lead to long-term outcomes and decisions. For example, how couples handle disagreements strongly predicts such outcomes as divorce and marital satisfaction (Gottman 1994; Gottman and Levenson 2000). However, there is little similar research on how unmarried and married low-income couples who receive public assistance interact or make decisions, or on whether these interactions are similar to or different from interaction patterns found among higher-income couples.

There are reasons to hypothesize that interaction processes and decision making in families receiving social services would differ from that of other families: low-income couples experience a greater degree of economic hardship and relationship instability. In addition to their lower average levels of employment and education (McLanahan et al. 2001; Fein 2004), they tend to be at higher risk for depression, psychological distress, health problems and disabilities (Danziger et al. 2000; Lennon et al. 2001). They are less likely to be married and more likely to have children outside of marriage, to live with children from their own or their partner's prior unions (Carlson and Furstenberg 2006), and among those who are married, to be at higher risk of divorce than couples with higher incomes (Fein et al. 2004).

<sup>1</sup>Hereafter often referred to as "partners."

Because of the dearth of research on the interaction processes of low-income couples, this study explored the question of whether and how the clients of social services and their partners influence each other's behavior and decision-making processes. The goal of the research was to investigate the role of partners as a first step toward understanding whether and how clients' program-related decisions may be affected.

This study enrolled married and unmarried public-assistance recipients and their partners, and applied established methods used in previous research on higher-income couples' interactions as well as new methods developed specifically for the study. Key research questions included:

- In what ways, if at all, might clients of social service programs be influenced by the behavior, desires, and input of their partners when making decisions?
- What role is played by contextual factors (such as which partner has most control of the couples' economic resources) in the decision-making processes of low-income couples?
- To what extent might it be useful, in promoting positive program outcomes, to take the presence and influence of partners into account?

## Methods

To be eligible for the study, at least one partner in each couple had to be receiving benefits from a public assistance program,<sup>2</sup> raising a child under age 18, and living with an intimate partner at least three months, among other criteria. Forty-five married and unmarried cohabiting couples (21 and 24, respectively) from a range of racial/ethnic backgrounds participated in the study. The majority had at least a high school education or GED, were 30 years of age or older, and 58 percent had been together as a couple for more than four years. About half the men and more than three-quarters of the women earned less than \$15,000 annually.

To examine the interaction processes of couples, the activities were video-recorded, and experienced researchers used a widely accepted, reliable observational coding system to quantify and document the couples' emotional and behavioral responses.<sup>3</sup> These codes were then linked to the survey data.

Several areas of the interaction and decision-making processes were explored. Researchers looked not only at the extent to which individuals were affected by their partners' displays of positive and negative

<sup>2</sup>Public assistance programs included: the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program; the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as Food Stamps); the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); subsidized housing; and child care assistance.

## TWO STAGES OF DATA COLLECTION

1. A 30-minute telephone survey conducted separately with each partner
2. A three-hour home visit in which couples participated in a series of semi-structured activities related to decision making. These activities included the following, among others:
  - Working together on a craft project that could involve many small decisions
  - Deciding first separately, then together, how they would spend \$5,000 in imaginary lottery winnings
  - Discussing and attempting to resolve an issue identified by the couple as a current area of disagreement

behavior (such as attempts at humor or attempts to dominate) but also at behaviors known to be associated with poor relationship outcomes, such as displays of contempt and withdrawing from the partner. Also examined were differences by family structure (marital status and cohabitation) and the influence of contextual factors on decision-making behavior, such as employment status and beliefs about relationship alternatives. Findings were compared to prior studies of interactions between middle-income married partners.

## What Did We Find?

**The couple, not the individual, appeared to be the decision-making unit.** Low-income individuals in couple relationships—married or otherwise—affected each other's behavior regardless of whether the activity was neutral (such as building a paper tower) or whether they were discussing a disagreement. A pattern of reciprocity was observed in which negative behavior by men was correlated with negative behavior by women; the same was true for positive behavior. Specific behaviors were also linked across men and women in patterns observed in prior studies. For example, displays of criticism by men were strongly and significantly related to defensiveness in women, while expressions of contempt by women were significantly correlated with negative behavior by men. In the lottery activity, most, but not all, individuals moved away from their initial preferences for spending winnings in order to compromise

<sup>3</sup>The Specific Affect (SPAFF) coding system (Gottman et al. 1996) codes observations for positive and negative verbal and nonverbal behavior that is typically rooted in emotion, such as attacks on a person's character (contempt), giving a partner the silent treatment (stonewalling), or reacting defensively to one's partner (defensiveness). This system was used because compromise, negotiation, and other decision-making behaviors often have their basis in emotion; e.g., people need to feel safe with one another in order to compromise effectively.

with their partner, and there was not much difference between men and women in which partner was more likely to move farther in the other's direction.

**Couples managed their disagreements in ways similar to higher-income couples.** Prior research shows that specific interaction behaviors such as verbal or nonverbal expressions of contempt, stonewalling, criticism, and defensiveness are powerful predictors of the long-term quality and stability of couples' relationships. Compared with a study of married higher-income couples, the levels of these behaviors and the total amount of positive and negative behavior expressed by individuals in the current study did not significantly differ. Likewise, the couples' ratios of positive to negative behavior during a discussion of a conflict (also a key predictor of outcomes in prior research) were similar in both studies. Yet there were limits to partner influence—just as with higher-income couples, the study found that an individual's steady emotional state before a disagreement is a better predictor of how the person will interact during a conflict than is the partner's behavior during the interaction.

**Cooperative behavior was limited by economic and attitudinal factors.** Most low-income couples collaborated during interactions, yet when there was less cooperation, the study found that this was associated with several contextual factors. Women were less likely to compromise with their partners on how to spend money when they received non-earned income such as cash welfare and child support, or when both the woman and her partner were employed. However, there was no similar link with women's earnings and education. This finding provides mixed support for a prominent economic theory that holds that individuals have greater bargaining power (and therefore are less likely to make concessions) when they have greater control of material resources in the family (Lundberg et al. 1997).

The findings supported the hypothesis that whether married or not, bargaining power is increased when individuals believe they have good alternatives to the current relationship (McElroy and Horney 1981). Men who reported believing they had better alternatives to their current relationship were more likely to display dominance, less likely to include their partner in activities, and less likely to be positive while interacting. The more men thought they would be better off if they were separated from their partners, the more they dominated the interaction and showed contempt for their partners. Women who perceived better relationship alternatives were less likely to move away from their initial preferences in the lottery activity.

**Few differences by family structure emerged.** Several hypotheses related to couples' interactions based on family structure were examined—for example, that

married couples would show greater consensus than unmarried couples, or that couples who had children from previous relationships (multiple partner fertility) would interact in ways that are different from couples who had children only from their current relationship. The study found only one significant difference: compared with married women, unmarried women displayed more contempt toward their partner during interactions.

## Implications for Programs

The behavioral interaction patterns observed in this study suggest that decisions made by social service recipients can reflect their partners' desires and input as well as their own. Although additional research is needed to confirm the findings with a larger and more representative sample, the influence of partners could play a role not only in clients' program-related decisions—such as whether to enroll, participate, or modify behavior—but also in whether they achieve expected program outcomes. This could have important implications for policy, program design, and service delivery. The influence of partners could be relevant to a variety of programs that seek to strengthen families and promote positive outcomes, such as employment programs, parenting classes, family planning services, and responsible fatherhood programs.

Program developers, service providers, and front-line workers may wish to consider strategies for addressing the role and influence of intimate partners and spouses when working with individuals in program-related plans or decisions. Partner influence may be addressed in a variety of ways, from involvement at the program planning and goal setting stages to directly involving partners in program services.

**Involving partners in planning and goal setting.** By including partners in program planning, the preferences and concerns of partners could be discussed openly and addressed in ways that make it more likely that partners would support the program and that clients would engage and complete it. For example, a mother who is ready to work full-time may have a partner who prefers that she work part-time so that she is more available to their children. In this case, engaging the partner and perhaps addressing his concern by obtaining access to high-quality early childhood education might facilitate the mother's entrance into full-time work and increase the probability of achieving program outcomes.

**Involving partners in program services.** Working with both parents together may have the potential to remove barriers and increase their mutual supportiveness of their own and the program's goals. For instance, if the partner of a client receiving employment services is also in need of such services,

both parents could be served together in the same or parallel programs in a way that coordinates their requirements for work schedules and child care, and that addresses their transportation needs. In one study that explored co-enrollment, mothers involved in the same work support program as their male partners demonstrated stronger short-term gains in employment and earnings than did mothers who participated alone (Gordon and Heinrich 2005).

Considering the influence of partners, however, may not mean that they should always be involved in service delivery. In fact, future research should seek to identify the circumstances under which individuals are likely to either undermine or support the program-related behavior and decisions of their partners. Decisions about whether and how to involve partners in programs should be made based on individual and contextual factors, and on the nature of the program's goals. A recent experimental study conducted in a developing country showed that when married women were offered access to contraceptives alone versus in the presence of their husbands, they were more likely to accept a concealable form of contraception, leading to a large reduction in unwanted births 9 to 14 months later (Ashraf et al. 2009).

### Future Research

Future work in this area should focus on developing program models that take partner influence into account so that they could be rigorously tested for their impacts on program effectiveness. These models would suggest how the influence of partners—in support of or counter to program goals—can be considered in ways that are likely to enhance program objectives and improve outcomes for families. Randomly assigning clients to a partner-influence model or to “services as usual” would permit researchers to determine whether addressing partner influence is more or less effective than a traditional approach that does not consider the partner's influence. Although further investigation is needed, the main implication of this study for human service programming is that low-income partners and spouses appear to influence each other in much the same way as other couples do, and therefore, they and/or their influence may need to be taken into consideration.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

M. Robin Dion, a senior research psychologist at Mathematica, has studied the effects of social policy and programming on the lives of low-income families since 1994. For further information, contact her at (202) 484-5262 or [rdion@mathematica-mpr.com](mailto:rdion@mathematica-mpr.com).

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