

By Robert G. Wood

Highlights from the First FRAMING Research Healthy Marriage Technical Work Group

Stable, supportive families are critical for child and adult well-being (Amato 2010; Waldfogel et al. 2010). A large body of research suggests that low-conflict, two-parent families provide many benefits for children's physical, cognitive, and social development (Amato 2005; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). Research also suggests that nonresident fathers' active involvement in their children's lives can protect against many of the adverse consequences of parental separation (Adamsons and Johnson 2013).

The federal government has made a long-standing commitment to support healthy relationships and responsible fatherhood programming. In the mid-1990s, Congress created the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families block grant program, which allowed states to use part of their funding to promote two-parent families and marriage (U.S. Congress 1996). Since 2006, Congress

has dedicated substantial funding each year to support healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood (HMRF) programming, with the ultimate aim of improving child well-being (U.S. Congress 2010 ; OFA 2015). The Office of Family Assistance (OFA) within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) oversees this funding and partners with the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE), also within ACF, to build the evidence base to strengthen the HMRF programming it supports (OFA 2019).

To systematically identify current gaps in the knowledge base for HMRF programming, ACF undertook the Fatherhood, Relationships, and Marriage – Illuminating the Next Generation of Research (FRAMING Research) project. ACF has partnered with Mathematica and its subcontractor Public Strategies to conduct the study (OPRE n.d.).



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About the FRAMING Research project

This work is part of the Fatherhood, Relationships, and Marriage – Illuminating the Next Generation of Research (FRAMING Research) project, sponsored by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. ACF has partnered with Mathematica and its subcontractor Public Strategies to conduct the FRAMING Research study. The FRAMING Research project team gathers and synthesizes information through literature reviews, knowledge mapping, stakeholder meetings, expert consultations, and two technical work groups—one with a focus on healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) programming and the other on responsible fatherhood (RF) programming. The project team is also drafting a series of white papers to explore key topics related to HMRE and RF programming that emerge during the course of the project.



THE FRAMING RESEARCH HMRE TECHNICAL WORK GROUP

This brief describes the first meeting of the HMRE technical work group for the FRAMING Research project, which was held in June 2019. ACF convened the group to provide input on the focus of future research to inform HMRE programming. The group included research experts on relationships, marriage, and HMRE programming, as well as HMRE practitioner experts (Table 1). The day focused on three topics relevant to the HMRE field: (1) the effects of HMRE programs on child well-being; (2) increasing participation rates in HMRE programs; and (3) strengthening HMRE programming for low-income unmarried couples. These topics emerged from the project team's review of the relevant literature and discussions with ACF about agency priorities. The technical work group also shared their insights on HMRE research priorities more broadly. The day concluded with technical work group members participating in a brainstorming session on HMRE research priorities. The brief highlights key points from the meeting; it does not cover all comments members of the group made.



HMRE PROGRAMS AND CHILD WELL-BEING

A central motivation for federally funded HMRE programming is to improve long-term child and family well-being. By providing instruction on skills-based marriage and relationship education, the intent is to increase the likelihood that children grow up in stable, married two-parent families, and thus improve their overall well-being (OFA 2019). To date, however, relatively few studies have looked at effects of HMRE programming on child well-being. The first technical work group discussion focused on strategies for building the evidence base in this important research area.

Before launching the discussion, the project team noted some of the challenges to building the evidence base in this area. These include the complexity and expense of collecting a large number of direct assessments of child outcomes, as well as the need to tailor measures of child well-being to the age of the child when the HMRE program of interest serves families with children of different ages.

Technical work group members noted the following during this part of the discussion:

- Research on the effects of HMRE programs on children should examine measures beyond self-regulation and behavior outcomes, which have been examined in previous studies. Additional measures to consider include family stability, exposure to parental conflict, the child's health and cognitive development, and whether the child's basic needs are met.
- Researchers should consider well-being measures that are household based and relate to the well-being of all children in the family, such as parenting practices or material hardship. These measures can give a more complete picture of child well-being than measures pertaining to only a single child in the household who has been selected for research purposes.
- When examining child well-being effects, researchers should focus on outcomes that HMRE programs are most likely to affect directly and that are most likely to be affected in the study follow-up period, such as exposure to parental conflict.
- Evaluators should collect detailed measures of child outcomes at baseline to improve the ability to detect effects in these outcomes at follow-up.
- Parental self-reports of child outcomes can be problematic in this context, because the HMRE intervention can affect parental perceptions of child well-being. This pattern could bias estimates of program effects.
- Research should examine whether parents use the communication skills they learn in HMRE classes with their children and whether they teach these skills to their children.

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- Qualitative research on HMRE programs could document the community and cultural context in which these programs operate and explore how structural determinants of poverty and health could influence program effectiveness.
 - Researchers should be cognizant of the possibility that implicit bias could distort evaluation designs by ignoring the cultural context of program participants.



INCREASING PARTICIPATION RATES IN HMRE PROGRAMS

For HMRE programs to be effective, participants must have substantial exposure to them (Nation et al. 2003). However, participation is a common challenge in these programs (Dion et al. 2010). Technical work group members discussed why regular attendance is often a challenge and how best to address this issue.

Technical work group members noted the following during this part of the discussion:

- Participants are drawn to programs in which the staff demonstrate empathy and an understanding of their circumstances. To be effective, program staff should be immersed in the issues that participants face in their daily lives. If staff's backgrounds differ from those of participants, staff must make it clear that they truly understand the challenges that participants face. To improve participation, programs should think carefully about participants' needs and the local context.
- Programs should aim to have a strong reputation in their community. Programs should work to cultivate community champions who will encourage people to enroll and attend the program regularly.
- Programs should aim to be highly responsive to participants. If a program puts people on a waiting list instead of helping them right away or fails to return a phone call, a perceived lack of responsiveness or a lengthy lapse in follow-up could adversely affect participation.
- Incentives can be an effective tool to promote program participation. Programs should balance their use with other strategies for encouraging attendance. Overuse might cause participants to feel that they are only attending the program for the incentives, which could discourage participation.
- Some participants may hesitate to attend a class where the specific goal is marriage despite their interest in healthy relationships and co-parenting; this hesitation may pose a barrier for some programs to recruit low-income, unmarried couples.
- Group cohesiveness can encourage regular attendance. For this reason, program staff should work to foster positive group dynamics and a feeling of connection among participants.



STRENGTHENING HMRE PROGRAMMING FOR LOW-INCOME UNMARRIED COUPLES

The literature on the effectiveness of HMRE programs serving low- and moderate-income populations suggests that these programs have been more successful in improving relationship outcomes for married couples than for unmarried couples (Wood et al. 2014; Lundquist et al. 2014; Hawkins and Erickson 2015; Moore et al. 2018). The technical work group discussion focused on why it might be harder for these programs to improve the outcomes of unmarried couples and how to strengthen HMRE programs for this group.

Technical work group members noted the following during this part of the discussion:

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- Low-income unmarried couples with children have diverse relationship circumstances. Some are committed to their romantic relationships and are similar in many ways to married couples. Others have less committed relationships. For some of these couples, not staying together might be the best option for them and their children.
 - For some low-income unmarried couples, their parenting relationship often came before they had both committed to their couple relationship. In some cases, an unplanned pregnancy and the economic pressures of having a new baby motivate unmarried couples to move in together. This kind of start can make it hard for the couple relationship to succeed.
 - Unmarried couples tend to be younger and are thus less settled in all aspects of their lives. This can create challenges for them in applying the lessons of HMRE programming. Other relationship challenges, such as having children with other partners or a history of childhood trauma, can be more common among unmarried couples served by HMRE programs. These challenges could limit the effectiveness of relationship skills education for these couples.
 - It can be a distraction for some unmarried couples with children to focus on maintaining the romantic relationship rather than focusing solely on fostering a good co-parenting relationship.
 - HMRE practitioners grapple with defining the goal of HMRE programs for unmarried couples and whether it differs from the goals for married couples. Specifically, is marriage always a goal for unmarried couples? Or might better communication and co-parenting be sufficient goals?
 - The group discussed whether HMRE programs serving unmarried couples could be designed with different pathways, so that programs could offer different services depending on the needs and circumstances of the unmarried couple. Such a program would focus on strengthening the romantic relationship for some couples. For others, it would focus primarily on helping couples improve their co-parenting relationship.



FUTURE HMRE RESEARCH PRIORITIES

The project team facilitated a brainstorming session with technical work group members about priority research questions and evaluation ideas related to HMRE programming. The technical work group members worked in small groups to develop their ideas and then shared them with the full group to develop a set of top priorities. Three top priorities emerged from this discussion, as described below.

Refine how HMRE programs address child outcomes; target research more directly on the child outcomes these programs aim to address

The group recommended that both program developers and researchers think carefully about the mechanism by which HMRE programs aim to improve child well-being. Program developers should ensure that the curriculum and other services the program offers clearly focus on the aspects of child well-being the intervention aims to influence. Researchers should then tailor data collection plans to focus carefully on the aspects of child well-being the program targets. To increase the likelihood of detecting program effects, researchers should focus primarily on child outcomes the intervention is directly designed to affect. Researchers should use creative approaches to gathering child outcome data, such as partnerships with school districts to gather data on academic performance.

Examine grantee organizations' capacity to implement HMRE programming successfully


The group recommended additional research on the characteristics of organizations that implement HMRE programs successfully. It noted that some organizations have the ability to run these programs effectively while others do not. The group suggested that researchers could compare the characteristics of higher- and lower-performing organizations to identify organizational factors that might help predict success in implementing HMRE programming. As part of this analysis, researchers should pay particular attention to organizations' ability to respond to cultural and institutional factors, such as the role that systemic racism and extreme poverty play in the communities they serve.

Conduct formative research on how to provide HMRE services to couples in a mix of relationship circumstances

Couples, particularly those who are low-income and unmarried, can enter an HMRE program with very different relationship circumstances. Some are very committed to each other; others are less committed or have relationships characterized by highly destructive conflict. Given this heterogeneity, the group recommended research aimed at developing HMRE programming that would offer different program pathways, depending on the level of commitment couples have to each other and the overall health of their relationship. Those with less healthy romantic relationships would enter a pathway that would focus on improving their co-parenting relationship.

The overarching goal of this multi-pathway program model would be to match couples to appropriate relationship services. This approach would likely require more intensive intake procedures and assessments of participant needs at program enrollment. More intensive case management could also be an important part of this approach, with case managers working with couples to determine which program pathway is most appropriate given the circumstances of their relationship and allowing couples to shift to the appropriate pathway during their time in the program.

Table 1. FRAMING Research HMRE technical work group members

<p>Susan Brown Distinguished Professor and Chair of Sociology, Bowling Green State University</p>		<p>Jennifer Randles Assistant Professor of Sociology, California State University</p>
<p>Andrew Daire Dean, School of Education, Virginia Commonwealth University; former HMRE program director</p>		<p>Rozario Slack HMRE trainer and speaker</p>
<p>Sarah Halpern-Meekin Associate Professor, Human Development and Family Studies Department, University of Wisconsin</p>		<p>Scott Stanley Professor of Psychology, University of Denver; HMRE curriculum developer</p>
<p>Alicia La Hoz Chief Executive Officer, Family Bridges (HMRE grantee)</p>		<p>Sarah Whitton Associate Professor of Psychology, University of Cincinnati</p>

Additional FRAMING Research technical work group meetings


In July 2019, the FRAMING Research project convened a second technical work group focused on research priorities concerning RF programming. The themes from that technical work group are summarized in a separate brief (Avellar et al. 2020). Both the HMRE and RF technical work groups will reconvene in 2020 to provide additional guidance to ACF on emerging research priorities.


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