

Optimizing Amount and Type of Practitioner Nudges in Online Relationship Education for Low-Income Couples

Name: S. Gabe Hatch

Mentor: Dr. Brian D. Doss

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University Affiliation: University of Miami

Background and Objectives

Divorce and separation are common, prevalent, and disproportionately affect low-income couples in the United States (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002). During the early years of marriage, low-income couples also report greater fluctuations in their relationship satisfaction than higher earners (Jackson et al., 2017). Unfortunately, in-person relationship education classes sometimes have problematic attrition rates and small or non-statistically significant effects on relationship well-being (Lundquist et al., 2014). Recently, investigators in this area have used principles from behavioral economics – e.g., nudges – to make these programs briefer and web-based (Doss et al., 2013). These shorter, web-based programs have higher adherence rates and report greater improvements in relationship well-being than in-person programs. However, one aspect that is understudied is the method and intensity of coaching a couple should receive to help them complete the program and the associated gains in relationship functioning – the primary objective of investigation in the current study.

Following from the existing behavioral economics research, this research has three related goals. The first aim intends to investigate how well we can predict completion rates and changes in relationship satisfaction for each level of coaching. The second aim of this study seeks to document the most powerful predictors of treatment adherence and gains in relationship satisfaction across three different levels of coaching. For the final aim of the study, the information gathered will be used to determine the most powerful predictors of any between-group differences.

Relevant Behavioral Concepts

The relevant behavioral concept that will be applied in the current study is “nudges,” meaning any small change in an environment that alters human behavior in a predictable way (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009). Over the past decade, relationship educators have applied two behavioral nudges to relationship education. The first nudge was making the programs briefer. Relationship educators have distilled 27-30 hours of intensive material into an 8-hour disseminatable workshop (Doss et al., 2013). Second, educators have sought to deliver these programs online, which allows busy couples to complete the program anywhere with a stable internet connection. However, one nudge is not well understood: how much personalized coaching contact should a given couple receive?

Research Questions

- What are the most important characteristics of the individual or couple that determine the intensity and method of “nudge” that they will require to complete and benefit from the OurRelationship program?
- After accounting for all the variables identified in the first research question, how well can one predict program completion and resulting gains?

Hypotheses

I hypothesize that regardless of coach assignment, lower external stress, and higher intrinsic motivation will emerge as reliable predictors of better adherence to the online program and subsequent treatment gains.

Sample

1,248 couples (N = 2,496 individuals) enrolled in a study investigating two online relationship education programs for low-income couples ([OurRelationship](#) and [ePREP](#)). Couples were recruited primarily through Google search and social media ads. In order to be eligible to participate, couples had to be in a committed relationship and report a household income less than 200% of the Federal poverty line. Couples were excluded if they reported severe intimate partner violence, did not have access to separate high speed internet, or had previously participated in an ePREP or OurRelationship program.

Methods

Data for this study come from a large web-based Sequential Multiple Assignment Randomized Trial (SMART), which varies the levels and types of coach contact that a couple receives. In the current study, couples were initially assigned to one of three levels of coaching (Full Coach, Automated Coach, and Contingent Coach conditions) and one of two levels of treatment (ePREP or OurRelationship), or the waitlist control condition. Couples who were non-adherent to the Automated Coach condition (i.e., did not complete an activity for 11 days) were then randomly reassigned either to remain in the same (Automated Coach) condition or to work with a coach.

Practice and Policy Implications

The first benefit of this project will be to social service programs and program administrators in the relationship education space. This project will help suggest ways to tailor relationship education programs to meet the needs of each unique couple. More broadly, a second benefit of this project to relationship educators will be the improvement of web- and evidence-based interventions for low-income couples.

References

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