

Documenting Program Outcomes of Relationship Education with Incarcerated Adults

Kate Taylor Harcourt

East Carolina University

Francesca Adler-Baeder

Auburn University

The current study examined program outcomes for an understudied population of Relationship Education (RE) participants: incarcerated men and women. In addition to relationship functioning, we examined a number of individual and parenting outcomes which had not previously been explored. In a sample of 453 adult inmates, we found improvements in (a) trust, (b) confidence in the relationship, (c) intimacy, (d) individual empowerment, (e) conflict management, (f) help-seeking attitudes, (g) self-esteem, (h) depression, (i) global life stress, (j) faulty relationship beliefs, and (k) parenting efficacy. Tests of moderation by gender and race indicated minimal differences in change patterns between groups; however, we found a significant time by gender interaction on intimacy and a time by race interaction on parenting efficacy. Implications for research and practice are presented.

Keywords: relationship education, incarceration, recidivism, healthy relationships

Introduction

Recent decades have been marked by increased levels of incarceration in the U.S., and many researchers are describing this time as an era of mass incarceration (e.g., Clear, 2007; Garland, 2001; Gottschalk, 2006; Mears, Cochran, Siennick, & Bales, 2012). Incarceration rates and the number of prisoners being released from prison each year continue to rise. Recent estimates suggest that over 1.6 million individuals are incarcerated in U.S. state and federal prisons (West, 2010), and over 735,000 prisoners are released each year (Sabol, West, & Cooper, 2009). It is also estimated that within 2 years of release, 59% of these prisoners will be rearrested, with 19% returning to prison with new sentences (Langan & Levin, 2002). While recidivism has emerged as a well-known social problem and continues to receive a high level of research interest, programming to address recidivism continues to face barriers. For example, although prison populations continue to climb, prisoner programming and services have declined (Mears et al., 2012). As a result, increased attention is being paid to the types of programs offered and their impact on recidivism rates (e.g., Einhorn et al., 2008; Gottschalk, 2006; Mears et al., 2012).

Direct correspondence to Kate Taylor Harcourt at harcourt14@ecu.edu

There is a growing body of literature that suggests strong, healthy relationships may be an important factor in successful reintegration (e.g., Berg & Huebner, 2011; Laub & Sampson, 1993; Visher & Travis, 2003). The theoretical framework used in our evaluation study utilizes assumptions from Laub and Sampson's (1993) age-graded theory of informal social control (also Sampson, Laub, & Wimer, 2006), which emphasizes the importance of social relationships in altering the trajectory of offenders (Lilly, Cullen, & Ball, 2007). For example, while marriage does not necessarily increase social control, close emotional ties and mutual investment are likely to increase the social bond between two people. This increase in social bonds could lead to a reduction in criminal behavior (Laub & Sampson, 1993; Shover, 1985). Furthermore, a life course perspective suggests that there is the potential for any specific experience or event (e.g., participation in a relationship education class) to result in a turning point, by offering new information or skills that have the potential to alter an individual's trajectory (e.g., Elder & Johnson, 2003).

A handful of early studies (e.g., Howser, Grossman, & Macdonald, 1984; Kemp, Glaser, Page, & Horne, 1992) indicate prisoners, both male and female, who maintain healthy, close family relationships are better able to cope with prison and exhibit less negative behaviors while incarcerated. In addition to the influence seen while in prison, research consistently shows social ties to family as being particularly important to successful reintegration (e.g., Berg & Huebner, 2011; Laub & Sampson, 1993; Visher & Travis, 2003). During incarceration, family members often become the core of an offender's social network (e.g., Mears et al., 2012; Shapiro & Schwartz, 2001), and most prisoners continue to rely on their family upon release from prison (Berg & Huebner, 2011). These studies indicate that those with stronger family relationships are also less likely to recidivate after release, thus pointing to the potential impact of administering family life education (FLE) in prison facilities. One form of FLE, typically referred to as relationship education (RE), addresses couple and coparenting relationships and focuses on strengthening the quality of these relationships. The training provided through RE offers a potentially untapped resource for addressing recidivism and the unique challenges faced by prisoners and their families.

While there has been an increase in research examining outcomes and impact of RE among more diverse populations (Hawkins & Fackrell, 2010), there remains little empirical attention on these programs serving prisoners even though there have been increased efforts to provide RE to this population (for exceptions, see Accordino & Guernsey, 1998; Einhorn et al., 2008). All relationships will encounter stressors that impact both individual and family functioning (Ooms & Wilson, 2004). Prisoners, however, face both common family stressors and unique challenges to relationship quality and stability during incarceration and upon release. Knowledge and skills are needed for staying connected to and for reconnecting with partners, children, and family members after separation, finding jobs, and reintegrating into society (e.g., Einhorn et al., 2008; Mears et al., 2012). One way to ease this stress may be to implement programs that better

prepare prisoners for life outside of prison (Einhorn et al., 2008). Only a handful of these programs exist, and most target educational or vocational skills, which while important, usually do not offer skills needed to deal with individual and family functioning (Haney, 2001).

While FLE with prisoners is more widely used, there is very little empirical evidence evaluating the specific use of RE with this population. To our knowledge, only three published studies have examined the experiences of prisoners participating in RE (Accordino & Guerny, 1998; Einhorn et al., 2008). Accordino and Guerny (1998) implemented a 2-day marriage enrichment program (16 hours total) for Jewish prisoners and their wives and focused on empathic, expressive, and discussion/negotiation skills. The evaluation component focused generally on quality of the program and leaders. Overall, participants found the program to be helpful and felt it was successful.

Einhorn et al. (2008) examined the impact of the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) with a sample of 254 male and female prisoners who were currently in a relationship. The study used a slightly modified version of PREP tailored to the prisoners' specific needs in prisons, and program classes took place over 6 weeks. They examined a range of relationship outcomes (e.g., satisfaction, dedication, confidence, and communication) and found significant increases in all areas. Additionally, they examined whether gender or race affected the results and found no significant interaction effects.

Shamblen, Arnold, Mckiernan, Collins, and Strader (2013) implemented a modified version of the Creating Lasting Family Connections program with 114 married couples where one spouse had recently been released from prison. Classes were either offered as a weekend retreat (two 8-hour sessions) or as a 10-session format (2 hours per session). Participants completed surveys at three time points (pre-test, post-test, and 3-month follow-up). The study examined a range of relationship and individual skills (e.g., communication skills, conflict resolution skills, emotional expression, and relationship satisfaction) and found that husbands and wives showed similar improvement.

While these three studies offer an initial look at the impact of RE on incarcerated samples, the studies have limited their samples to include only those currently in couple relationships. As such, the studies have focused primarily on outcomes measuring couple relationship skills. Only one (Shamblen et al., 2013) included examinations of individual skills that are necessary for maintaining healthy relationships with others, but it confined the study to those who were currently in a relationship and recently released from prison.

Current Study

In an effort to extend this literature, the current study examined levels of change among male and female prisoners participating in RE classes, regardless of current relationship status. In addition to relationship functioning measures, we examined a number of individual and parental functioning measures, which have not previously been explored as outcomes for RE with prison populations. In addition, we explored moderation of program outcomes by gender and race.

Thus, the current study addressed the following research questions:

R1: Does participating in RE result in positive change on measures of couple, individual, and parental functioning for a sample of incarcerated adults?

R2: Does this change differ by gender and racial subgroups? That is, are there interactions of time by gender and time by race?

Method

Sample and Procedure

This research was approved by the Institutional Review Board and conducted in accordance with ethical standards for voluntary participation, informed consent, and confidentiality. Participants in this study were recruited as part of a federally-funded healthy marriage and relationship education initiative. Programs were delivered and data were collected by trained educators from family resource centers (FRC) located in eight counties in a Southern state. The sample was drawn from 502 adult prisoners from seven facilities across the state. Individuals voluntarily signed up for the RE classes after information about the upcoming classes was distributed by the prison and did not receive incentives from the Department of Corrections or the research study. Individuals who participated completed a questionnaire prior to program start of approximately 130 items assessing their behaviors, experiences, beliefs, and attitudes regarding their individual functioning, relationships, and family, in addition to socio-demographic information. The analytic sample was restricted to the 453 adult prisoners who completed a pre-test and post-test

The RE programs included information designed to support and prepare participants to build and maintain healthy couple and coparenting relationships, and to provide a secure, healthy environment for their children. Various RE curricula were implemented and consisted of a minimum of six group education sessions. All curricula were selected based on their inclusion of the seven core components identified by the National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Network (NERMEN; Futris & Adler-Baeder, 2014) including: (a) *choose* (being intentional in relationships), (b) *know* (having knowledge of one's partner), (c) *care* (being kind,

affectionate, and supportive in relationships), (d) *care for self* (maintaining and enhancing one's own health and wellness), (e) *share* (developing friendship and a sense of togetherness), (f) *connect* (engaging social support, ties to the community, and finding personal meaning), and (g) *manage* (using engagement and interaction strategies to handle differences, stresses, and safety issues).

Forty-nine percent of individuals in the sample identified as African American, 47% European American, 1.5% Latino, and 2.5% "other." The average age of participants was 38. Gender composition was 80% female and 20% male. Participants were asked about their educational attainment. Twenty-four percent did not complete high school, 36% completed high school (or GED) only, 18% completed some college, 17% completed a 2-year college program, 4% completed 4 years of college, and 1% had post-college education. Relationship status was determined by a single question: "What is your current relationship status?" Options for responses were: (a) married, (b) engaged/living together, (c) engaged/not living together, (d) dating someone/living together, (e) dating someone/not living together, or (f) single, no current relationship. Respondents did not complete items that did not pertain to them (i.e., parenting items if they were not a parent; couple items if they were not in a couple relationship). Thirty-eight percent of participants reported being single and not in a dating relationship, while 26% reported being in a marital relationship, 24% reported being in a dating relationship, and 12% reported being engaged. Of the participants, 55% reported being a parent, with 44% reporting having a child under the age of 19. Only those participants who were currently in a relationship answered questions about couple functioning; only those participants who were parents answered questions about parental functioning.

Measures

Along with demographic variables, surveys assessed various aspects of three domains of functioning – couple, individual, and parental. The study assessed change from pre-test to post-test on measures of functioning in each domain. Initially, 24 outcomes were examined using the full sample, yet the following measures provide descriptions of outcomes for which significant change was found following the analysis. Detailed descriptions and references of all measures can be obtained from the first author.

Couple functioning domain. *Trust* was measured with a three-item scale (Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985) assessing perceptions of a partner's dependability, with items such as "I can rely on my partner to keep the promises he/she makes to me," using a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The Cronbach's alpha reliability for the current study was $\alpha = .84$. *Confidence in the relationship* was measured using three items (Stanley & Markman, 1992). Questions included such items as "I am very confident when I think about our future together." Participants responded using a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 (*not at all*) to 5

(*extremely*). The Cronbach's alpha reliability for the current study was $\alpha = .91$. *Intimacy* was measured using three items. Questions included such items as "I keep very personal information to myself and do not share it with my partner/spouse." Participants responded using a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*all of the time*). The Cronbach's alpha reliability for the current study was $\alpha = .73$.

Individual functioning domain. *Individual empowerment* was measured using six items. Published studies utilizing this measure demonstrate reliability (range: $\alpha = .71-.75$; Adler-Baeder et al., 2010; Lucier-Greer, Adler-Baeder, Ketring, Harcourt, & Smith, 2012). Questions included such items as "I express myself clearly and without fear" and "I have the power to manage challenges in my life." Participants responded using a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 (*I have not thought about this*) to 5 (*I do this on a regular basis*). The Cronbach's alpha reliability for the current study was $\alpha = .76$. *Conflict management* was measured using six items (Buhrmester, Furman, Wittenberg, & Reis, 1988). Questions included items such as "I am able to put bitter feelings aside when having a fight" and "In a fight, I am able to see the other person's point of view and really understand his/her point." Participants responded using a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 (*not at all like me*) to 5 (*very much like me*). The Cronbach's alpha reliability for the current study was $\alpha = .76$. *Help-seeking attitudes* was measured using three items. Questions included such items as "I would want to get help if I were worried or upset for a long period of time." Participants responded using a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The Cronbach's alpha reliability for the current study was $\alpha = .84$. *Self-esteem* was measured using three items (Rosenberg, 1989). Questions included such items as "I take a positive attitude toward myself." Participants responded using a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The Cronbach's alpha reliability for the current study was $\alpha = .64$. *Depressive symptoms* were measured using three items (Center for Epidemiological Studies – Depression Scale; Radloff, 1977). Questions included such items as "I felt depressed" and "I felt sad." Participants responded using a 4-point Likert scale, from 0 (*none*) to 3 (*3+ times*). The Cronbach's alpha reliability for the current study was $\alpha = .86$. One item was used to measure *global life stress* (i.e., "How would you rate your overall level of stress over the past month?") on a 7-point Likert scale, from 1 (*no stress*) to 7 (*high stress*). Faulty relationship beliefs (Cobb, Larson, & Watson, 2003) such as *ease of effort in the relationship* (e.g., "Finding the right person is all about luck") and *cohabitation beliefs* (e.g., "Living together before marriage will make your marriage happier") were assessed on a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The Cronbach's alpha reliability for *ease of effort* in the current study was $\alpha = .70$. The Cronbach's alpha reliability for *cohabitation beliefs* in the current study was $\alpha = .97$.

Parental functioning domain. *Parenting efficacy* was measured using three items (Dumka, Stoerzinger, Jackson, & Roosa, 1996). Questions included such items as "I feel sure of myself as a parent" and "I know things about being a parent that would be helpful to other parents."

Participants responded using a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The Cronbach's alpha reliability for the current study was $\alpha = .65$.

Results

The current study examined differences in changes from pre-test to post-test using paired sample *t*-tests. Repeated measures mixed between–within subject analyses of variance (RMANOVAs) were used to determine whether there were time by gender and time by race interaction effects.

R1: Does participating in RE result in positive change on measures of couple, individual, and parental functioning for a sample of incarcerated adults?

Paired-sample *t*-tests indicated significant change on measures in all three domains (Table 1). In the **couple functioning domain**, analyses indicated change on measures of *trust* ($t(139) = -2.21, p < 0.05$), *confidence in the relationship* ($t(138) = -1.94, p < 0.05$), and *intimacy* ($t(142) = -2.24, p < 0.05$). In the **individual functioning domain**, analyses indicated significant change on measures of *individual empowerment* ($t(275) = -4.29, p < 0.05$), *conflict management* ($t(283) = -1.92, p < 0.05$), *help-seeking attitudes* ($t(60) = -2.84, p < 0.05$), *self-esteem* ($t(40) = -4.09, p < 0.05$), *depressive symptoms* ($t(282) = 2.85, p < 0.05$), *global life stress* ($t(161) = 2.09, p < 0.05$), and faulty relationship beliefs in areas such as *cohabitation* ($t(36) = 3.02, p < 0.05$) and *ease of effort in the relationship* ($t(38) = 2.13, p < 0.05$). In the **parental functioning domain**, analyses indicated change on measures of *parenting efficacy* ($t(199) = -2.07, p < 0.05$). The effect sizes in the current sample ranged from .17 to .90, with an average effect size of .39.

Table 1. Paired Sample *t*-Tests Examining Changes From Pre- to Post-Assessment

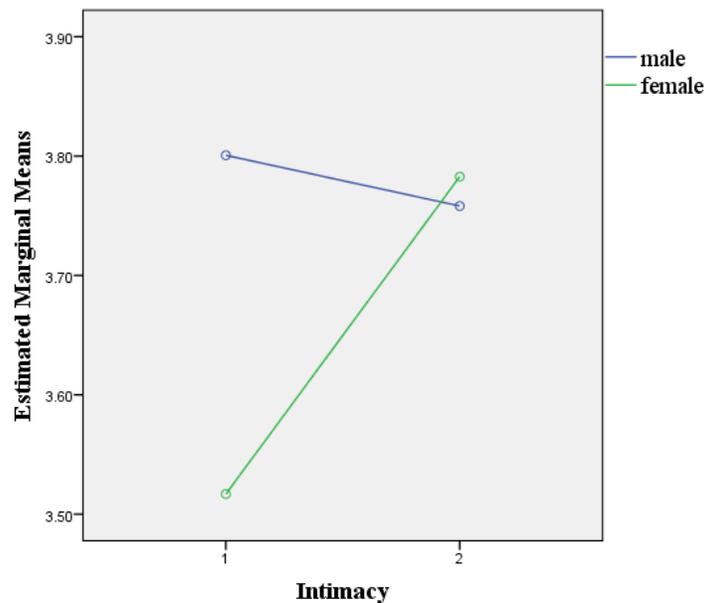
	Pre		Post		<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Couple Functioning							
Trust	3.32	1.21	3.49	1.25	151	-1.97*	0.27
Confidence in Relationship	3.55	1.25	3.78	1.28	154	-2.22*	0.23
Intimacy	3.59	0.88	3.73	0.85	158	-2.19*	0.29
Individual Functioning							
Individual Empowerment	3.73	0.84	3.97	0.81	275	-4.29***	0.38
Conflict Management	3.31	0.97	3.44	1.02	283	-1.92*	0.17
Help-Seeking Attitudes	3.17	0.61	3.39	0.57	60	-2.84**	0.52
Self-Esteem	4.28	0.58	4.63	0.51	40	-4.09***	0.90
Depression	1.32	0.99	1.15	0.98	282	2.85**	0.24
Life Stress	4.61	1.65	4.33	1.68	161	2.09*	0.23
Cohabitation	2.46	1.17	1.98	1.03	36	3.02**	0.72
Ease of Effort	2.46	0.82	2.24	0.72	38	2.13*	0.49
Parental Functioning							
Parenting Efficacy	4.18	0.75	4.30	0.72	199	-2.07*	0.22

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$ two-tailed tests

R2: Does this change differ by gender and racial subgroups? That is, are there interactions of time by gender and time by race?

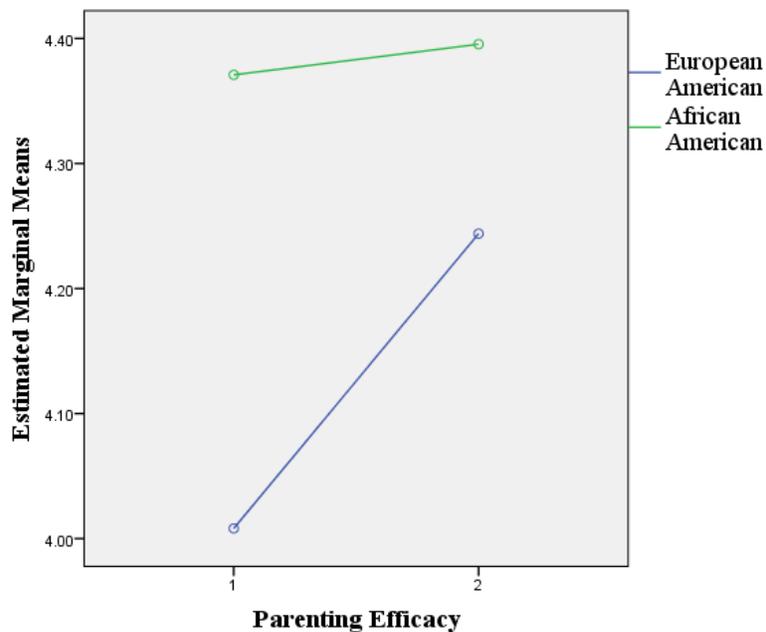
RMANOVAs indicated time by gender interaction effects on *intimacy* (Figure 1) [$F(1,153) = 5.38, p = .022, partial\ eta\ squared = .034$], with females showing an increase in intimacy and males maintaining lower levels of intimacy, but no interaction effects on other measures.

Figure 1. Differences Between Males and Females on Intimacy Over Time



RMANOVAs also revealed time by race interaction effects only on *parenting efficacy* (Figure 2) [$F(5,192) = 3.14, p = .010, partial\ eta\ squared = .075$]. While African Americans indicated higher levels of parenting efficacy at both pre-test and post-test, European Americans showed an increase in this domain from pre-test to post-test.

Figure 2. Differences Between African Americans and European Americans on Parenting Efficacy Over Time



Discussion

The results of this study are consistent with previous results (Accordino & Guerney, 1998; Einhorn et al., 2008; Shamblen et al., 2013) and offer additional outcome information with a larger, more diverse sample. Findings suggest the potential benefit of implementing relationship education classes in prison facilities. The current study found improvement in three distinct domains of functioning (i.e., couple, individual, and parenting). The effect sizes in the current sample ranged from .17 to .90, and most effect sizes were in the small-to-moderate range (Cohen, 1977). The largest effect sizes were seen on measures of individual functioning (e.g., self-esteem, help-seeking attitudes, and faulty relationship beliefs); average effect size across all domains was .39, indicating a level of meaningful change for program effect (i.e., > .25; Wolf, 1986). These are consistent with those reported in a recent meta-analysis that examined the impact of marriage education programs (Fawcett, Blanchard, & Hawkins, 2006) and with those found in the Einhorn et al. (2008) prison study report of effect sizes ranging from .19 to .81. Notably, the three previous studies examining RE in this population included only couples. The results of the current study suggest that RE may be as impactful, even if prisoners attend classes as individuals. In addition, RE may positively influence those not in couple relationships by improving functioning in the individual and parenting domains.

The improvements found in the domains of individual, family, and parental functioning suggest that the impact of RE in prisons may extend beyond couple relationships and contribute to an overall better quality of life for prisoners and their families. It is estimated that more than 50% of incarcerated adults are parents of minor children (Travis, McBride, & Solomon, 2003). While the program content was focused on relationships between couples and coparents, research indicates that improving the couple relationship also positively impacts the children (Grych & Fincham, 2001; Kirkland et al., 2011). Additionally, participants often discussed how their relationship skills can be used in their parenting. Learning to use these skills in multiple domains of functioning improves the quality of relationships within the family and helps overcome some of the barriers (e.g., intimacy and parenting efficacy) to maintaining strong, connected relationships while incarcerated.

We did find a significant gender interaction on measures of intimacy and a significant race interaction on measures of parenting efficacy. Females started at lower levels of intimacy and reported an increase in feelings of intimacy pre-test to post-test, while males maintained similar levels of intimacy pre-test to post-test. This is consistent with previous literature indicating gender differences in reports of relationship quality (e.g., intimacy) and the tendency for men to rate relationships as more satisfactory than women (Fowers, 1991; Jose & Alfons, 2007). African Americans and European Americans both indicated gains in parenting efficacy; however, European Americans showed significantly greater gains over the two assessment points. With the exception of these two outcomes, participants appeared to benefit similarly regardless of gender or race. This is important to note because it offers further evidence of the value of RE with diverse samples.

Limitations

While this study contributes to the literature in many ways, there are also a number of limitations to be considered. Using only a pre-test/post-test design does not allow for the assessment of long-term benefits of the program. Since the post-test is given at the time of class completion, we are assessing change while the participant is still incarcerated. It would be important to examine these areas of change after the participant has been released from prison. Also, since the RE class was implemented only to individuals who were incarcerated, we are unable to assess the impact of these classes, if any, seen by partners or children outside of the facility. This is the initial step in our study, and these follow-ups are planned for future research.

Finally, because comparison groups were not utilized, mostly owing to policies regarding collection of these data that are complicated within prisons, we cannot say definitively that these patterns of change were solely due to program participation. We can, however, note the calculated effect sizes (appropriate formulas for paired comparisons were used). The average effect size was moderate (.39) and well above the level of meaningful/practical differences for an

educational program (i.e., $> .25$; Wolf, 1986). Because of their magnitude, we can have some confidence that these documented changes over a short period of time are due to program participation. Clearly, participants are receptive to the program, and results from these analyses provide encouragement for continued work in this area.

Conclusions and Future Directions

A potential long-term goal would be to provide prisoners with the knowledge and skills to successfully integrate back into society after release. Given the evidence of change following participation in RE on individual, couple, and parental functioning seen in this study, and the research that links strong relationships to better adjustment outside of prison (Mears et al., 2012), it is important for future research to examine the impact of RE classes on family relationships post-release and on recidivism rates.

While it is important to assess the impact of RE on individuals, we also realize the potential benefit of having classes that include family members. Although it may pose additional challenges to involve family members in the education classes (e.g., long distances, transportation, cooperation of the correctional facility), it would be valuable to assess the impact of these classes on each member of the family and to compare the impact of classes received by individuals versus couples.

Overall, this study adds to the literature in several ways. First, it adds to the overall research on RE and provides an examination of RE in a more diverse setting. While outcomes of RE have been well documented, there is less evidence of program benefits to more diverse, disadvantaged samples (Hawkins & Fackrell, 2010). Additionally, evaluating RE with prisoners is beneficial to researchers, policymakers, and government agencies alike as it offers a potential avenue for improving the well-being of incarcerated adults and their relationships. We know from previous research that incarcerated adults often feel a strain, due to their struggling relationships, during and after incarceration (Mears et al., 2012), which can lead to poor adjustment to life outside of prison and to the risk of recidivism. While most prison programs tend to focus on vocational skills, including relationship education (focusing on individual, couple, familial, and parental functioning) may provide additional skills necessary for successful re-entry into families and society.

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Kate Taylor Harcourt is an Assistant Professor in Child Development and Family Relations at East Carolina University. Her research is focused on using family science to advance our understanding of diverse youths and families, and to further the development of programs and practices that promote the well-being of diverse youths and families.

Francesca Adler-Baeder is a Professor and Extension Specialist in Human Development and Family Studies at Auburn University. Her applied research is focused on the assessment of relationship and marriage education programs targeting a broad population of couples, adult singles, and youths, with particular attention to the needs of low-resource families, post-divorce families, stepfamilies, families affected by incarceration, and military families.

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