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Shifting the Relationship Education Field to Prioritize Youth Relationship Education

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ABSTRACT

The field of couple and relationship education is dominated by a focus on helping committed couples strengthen their relationship. This article reviews several lines of research to argue that the field should give greater priority to youth relationship education—individually oriented relationship literacy education for adolescents and young adults. Serious problems are common in adolescent and young adult romantic relationships and increasing numbers of youth follow paths from adolescence to marriage that make it harder for them to form and sustain a healthy marriage. Early evidence on the effectiveness of individually oriented youth relationship education provides some reason for optimism. The article concludes by exploring implications of this proposed shift in the field for practice and policy.

KEYWORDS

Couple and Relationship Education (CRE); emerging adulthood; premarital education; prevention approaches

In this article, I argue that the field of couple and relationship education (CRE) needs to make a major shift of energy and priorities. For 40 years, the modern field has given overwhelming priority to helping couples in intact, committed relationships—engaged, married, and, more recently, unmarried cohabiting parents—strengthen their relationships (Rhoades & Stanley, 2011). The oft-used phrase is that CRE is designed to help couples form and sustain healthy relationships and marriages. The dominant focus of CRE has been on couples and sustaining couple relationships to increase family stability among couples already in a relationship, with the ultimate goal of improving outcomes for children. During the past four decades, only a small proportion of CRE scholarship has attended to efforts to help adolescents and young adults who are not in committed relationships to understand healthy dating and relationship formation behavior. Three-fourths of U.S. high school seniors report that having a good marriage is extremely important to them (Wilcox & Marquart, 2010), and 80% of unmarried young adults say that it is important to them to be married someday, with only minor variation across race and class (Scott, Schelar, Manlove, & Cui, 2009). (See Willoughby & Carroll, 2016, for a more-detailed summary of these attitudes.) But aspirations alone may not be enough to

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arrive at young people's destinations in the face of many potential detours and barriers.

Drawing on recent meta-analytic work synthesizing the effectiveness of relationship education programs and a review of the most recent studies in the field, I tabulated the proportion of relationship education evaluation studies from 1975 to 2016 targeting couples and those targeting individuals (either adolescents or young adults). Only 35 (13%) of 262 studies targeted the intervention to young individuals, although the pace of work in this area appears to have picked up during the past decade. Of course, the body of evaluation studies may not reflect the actual practice of all relationship education programs, but this is an educated guess about where our attention has been focused in the field. I argue that the distribution of effort in the field needs to change if this work is going to help reduce family instability in contemporary society.

In asserting this need to shift our priorities, I do not mean to suggest that the CRE field should abandon its concern with helping intact couples strengthen their relationships. As numerous meta-analytic studies of CRE during the past decade have shown (Blanchard, Hawkins, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2009; Fawcett, Hawkins, Blanchard, & Carroll, 2010; Fentz & Trillingsgaard, 2016; Hawkins & Erickson, 2015; Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2008; Lucier-Greer & Adler-Baeder, 2012; Pinquart & Teubert, 2010), these programs are able to help intact couples strengthen their relationships and even prevent divorce (Hahlweg & Richter, 2010; Stanley et al., 2014). Of course, there is healthy debate about how effective these programs are and whether they can be a viable element in social policy initiatives to help disadvantaged families (Hawkins et al., 2013; Johnson, 2012; Johnson & Bradbury, 2015; Randles, 2017). Regardless, my argument here is that the distribution of effort needs to shift to give greater emphasis to individually oriented relationship education for adolescents and young adults, to help them understand healthy relationship formation and chart paths that optimize their chances for future relationship and marital success.

Admittedly, I am not the first to call attention to the value of relationship education for adolescents and young adults, although I am providing here the most thorough rationale for doing so. Eminent scholars from diverse disciplines have mentioned the need for more help for young people. For instance, Rhoades and Stanley have argued: “[I]ntervening earlier in relationship development, before individuals are committed or perhaps even partnered, has the potential to have an even greater impact on improving relationship quality” [than interventions for couples already committed to marriage] (Rhoades & Stanley, 2009, p. 46). They argue that if we only offer couple education after a couple has formed, we likely miss crucial turning points in people's romantic lives. Fincham advocates for relationships to become the “4th R” in school: reading, ‘riting, ‘rithmetic, and relationships (Fincham, 2012). Similarly, Karney and his colleagues interpret a wide range of research as “consistent with a model that views adolescent romantic relationships as a key period during which the foundations of healthy adult marriages may be strengthened” (Karney, Beckett, Collins, & Shaw, 2007, p. xvii). Manning and her

colleagues conclude that relationship education programs that begin earlier in adolescence may more effectively help couples form and sustain healthy marriages, by preventing early relationship problems that shape negative future relationship trajectories (Manning, Trella, Lyons, & du Toit, 2010). Barber and Eccles (2003) argue that relationship education curricula can help adolescents develop the knowledge and interpersonal skills that increase their chances of experiencing positive relationships and extracting themselves from low-quality relationships. Smith and colleagues, in their book exploring the darker side of emerging adulthood, wrote: “We are failing to equip our youth with the ideas, tools, and practices to know how to negotiate their romantic and sexual lives in healthy, nondestructive ways that prepare them to achieve the happy, functional marriages and families that most of them say they want in future years” (Smith, Christoffersen, Davidson, & Herzog, 2011, p. 238). Similarly, Regnerus and Uecker, in their lengthy examination of premarital sex among young adults in the United States, noted “There is little effort from any institutional source aimed at helping emerging adults consider how their present social, romantic, and sexual experiences shape or war against their vision of marriage” (Regnerus & Uecker, 2011, p. 170). And apparently, they want more help. Weissbourd and his colleagues with the Making Caring Common Project at Harvard University recently surveyed 3,000 youth and young adults to understand their romantic and sexual experiences (Weissbourd, Anderson, Cashin, & McIntyre, 2017). They found that 70% of 18-to-25-year-olds reported wishing they had received more information and help from their parents about some emotional aspect of a romantic relationship, and 65% reported wishing they had received guidance on romantic relationships in a health or sex education class at school.

Once couples commit to a permanent union and marriages form, it is still important to support those relationships. But there may be only so much that can be achieved when these marriages are formed on weaker foundations resulting from problems brought into the marriage. Thus, this article outlines the public need for early action to help more young people safely navigate the lengthening trek from early adolescence to a healthy marriage in adulthood. The argument for greater emphasis on relationship education for adolescents and young adults derives from accumulating bodies of evidence that point toward the conclusion that too many marriages begin at lower levels of marital quality. Change is possible and interventions can alter trajectories, but too many couples face a steep, uphill climb to long-term marital success. Lower quality relationships often become marriages, but these unions are at high risk for eventual dissolution. Moreover, these problems may be preventable and young people can learn to avoid the pitfalls of problematic relationship formation, follow safer behavioral paths to healthy and stable marriages, or terminate high-risk relationships before marriage and parenting.

In this article, then, I harness several overlapping lines of research to argue for greater investment in youth relationship education (YRE). One body of research documents problematic issues relating to adolescent romantic relationships, including high levels of aggression and violence. A second body of research documents the increasing potential for youth to follow paths from early adolescence to marriage

that make it harder to form and sustain a healthy marriage down the road. A third line of research documents that many marriages begin at lower levels of quality that put the long-term success of the union in jeopardy. A fourth body of scholarship documents the challenges of helping married couples once dysfunctional patterns have set in. Finally, the early evidence for the effectiveness of individually oriented youth relationship education gives some reason for optimism. I conclude with some thoughts about premarital couple education and the implications of my thesis for practice and policy.

The Need to Prioritize Youth Relationship Education

Problems Start Early

Long before young people are thinking seriously about marriage, they are making important romantic relationship decisions and transitions, although often without forethought (Rhoades & Stanley, 2009). By age 18, two-thirds of adolescents have been in a romantic relationship, many lasting longer than 1 year (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003). Rates appear similar for lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender (LGBT) youth (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009). Prominent scholars argue that romantic relationships in youth are neither transitory nor trivial, but instead have real effects, positive and negative, on adolescent development (Barber & Eccles, 2003; Collins, 2003; Furman & Shafer, 2003; Joyner & Udry, 2000). For instance, high-quality relationships are associated with greater well-being in youth and healthy relationships in early adulthood, but low-quality youth relationships are associated with a wide range of negative outcomes in adolescence (Collins et al., 2009). And sexual activity among early adolescent couples (but less so among young adults) is associated with poor mental health, impaired school performance, and other problems (Collins et al., 2009). Youth romantic relationships contain more conflict than peer friendships (Collins et al., 2009). One national study estimated that almost 70% of youth report being a victim of some kind of relationship abuse during their adolescent years (Taylor & Mumford, 2016). Some research suggests that LGBT youth are especially likely to experience dating violence and abuse (Dank, Lachman, Zweig, & Yahner, 2014).

Almost half of young adults aged 18–25 are cohabiting or seriously dating, with minimal differences across race and ethnicity (Scott, Steward-Streng, Manlove, Schelar, & Cui, 2011). Overall, research on romantic relationship during the emerging adult years documents a widespread delay of marriage accompanied by shorter-term, unstable, and often more casual relationships (Shulman & Connolly, 2016). Emerging adults with longer marital horizons (anticipating later marriage) are more likely to engage in risk-taking behaviors (e.g., casual sex, substance use) (Willoughby & Carroll, 2016). Also, researchers estimate that 30%–40% of young adult romantic relationships involve some kind of physical relationship violence (Berger, Wildsmith, Manlove, & Steward-Streng, 2012). Among low-income young women, common early experiences of abuse from adult caregivers and adolescent romantic partners lead to struggles to form healthy relationships and marriages in adulthood

(Cherlin, Burton, Hurt, & Purvin, 2004), and these kinds of relationship trauma contribute to low levels of trust toward male partners (Burton, Cherlin, Winn, Astacion, & Holder-Taylor, 2009). Young adult romantic relationships often include relationship “churning”—breaking up and getting back together again—which is associated with much higher risk for later relationship violence and verbal abuse regardless of race and ethnicity (Halpern-Meekin, Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2013). Vennum and Johnson (2014) found that 30% of newlywed couples experienced premarital cycling—or churning—while dating, and this predicted lower initial marital quality.

While recent cohorts of young adults have pushed marriage back over the temporal horizon, many have not delayed forming romantic relationships. Delaying marriage until the late 20s should help young people form and sustain stronger marriages, knowing that marriage before the early 20s is one of the strongest predictors of divorce (Heaton, 2002). But the counterfactual to delayed marriage must be considered. That is, romantic relationships and sex and, for some, bearing children and starting families are filling the temporal gap between pubescent adolescence (which is arriving earlier and earlier) and marriage (which is occurring later and later). And these behaviors are not without important consequences for the ability to form and sustain a healthy marriage when the matrimonial moment finally arrives.

Potentially Problematic Pathways to Marriage

Researchers have identified a number of premarital risk behaviors associated with poorer marital quality and divorce, such as early sexual initiation and nonmarital childbearing. For instance, one study followed a nationally representative sample of more than 1,000 unmarried young adults who were in a serious romantic relationship for 5 years, asking detailed questions about premarital relationship behavior and attitudes (Rhoades & Stanley, 2014). Over the course of the study, more than 400 study participants married. Focusing on these married couples, the researchers were able to examine how premarital behaviors, choices, and attitudes influenced marital quality. They concluded that premarital experiences of love, sex, and fertility are linked to future marital quality. The researchers found that early initiation of sex in the relationship was associated with poorer marital quality later on, echoing what Busby, Carroll, and Willoughby (2010) found in a separate study. In addition, Rhoades and Stanley found that while some couples make clear decisions that move them from one relationship stage to another, others are less intentional, and “couples who slide through their relationship transitions have poorer marital quality than those who make intentional decisions about major milestones” (p. 5).

Scholars have debated the impact of premarital cohabitation on marital success. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of American adults believe that it is a good idea to live together before getting married, with Millennials (72%) and Gen-Xers (69%) reporting even higher rates of approval (“Majority of Americans now believe in cohabitation,” 2016). And by far the primary reason Americans give for premarital cohabitation is to test compatibility (84%). More than 80% believe that premarital

cohabitation reduces or does not affect the pressure to get married. A meta-analysis on this question, however, concluded that premarital cohabitation was associated with poorer subsequent marital quality and marital dissolution (Jose, O’Leary, & Moyer, 2010). There are important qualifications to this general finding, however. Other studies suggest that these negative effects are driven primarily by cohabitating couples with nonmarital births (Tach & Halpern-Meekin, 2009), by serial cohabitation (Teachman, 2003), and by precommitment cohabitation (living together without a strong commitment to the future) (Kline et al., 2004; Rhoades & Stanley, 2014). One study found that the negative effects of premarital cohabitation appear to be waning for the most recent cohorts of cohabitators, perhaps due to the widespread practice and normalization of cohabitation (Manning & Cohen, 2012). A large majority of couples choose to cohabit before marrying, but *how* they do so seems to matter for marital quality and stability down the road. Those who cohabit with fewer partners, who have a commitment to a future together before they move in together, and who do not have a child before they marry have significantly higher odds for marital success.

The road that links adolescence to adult family life is not a paved interstate, with efficient on- and off-ramps, helpful guideposts, and numerous safety features to prevent or cushion mistakes. Moreover, youth navigate alone for the most part. In contrast to a few generations ago, society generally takes a hands-off approach to regulating adolescent and young adult romantic relationships (Côté, 2000; Regnerus & Uecker, 2011). Not surprisingly, then, many young people arrive at their family destinations battered and bruised. If youth are going to get to their destinations in good shape to form a healthy marriage, we need to educate them on the relationship rules of the road. There is an analogy here to driver education. Anticipating the challenges and dangers that young drivers face and the costs of driving mistakes to individuals, families, and communities, schools make driver education widely available to students.

How Marriages Begin Matters

Given the evidence reviewed of serious problems in many early romantic relationships and problematic pathways into marriage, it should not surprise us that a growing body of research documents that the seeds of marital struggles often are present from the beginning of the marriage. While many think of engaged and newlywed couples as having stars in their eyes, confidence in forever, and no significant problems, recent research paints a more complex picture. For instance, one study found that nearly half of husbands and more than a third of wives reported they had significant doubts about marrying prior to marriage (Lavner, Karney, & Bradbury, 2012). This translates into about two-thirds of marriages in which one or both spouses had premarital doubts about the success of the marriage. The researchers found that these doubts, though common, were not benign. Greater doubts about marrying were associated with lower marital quality trajectories and higher rates of divorce in the early years of marriage (see, also, Johnson & Anderson, 2013). This finding about

the level of premarital doubts seems consistent with other studies finding that many couples end up sliding into marriage with less than a firm commitment (Stanley, Rhoades, & Whitton, 2010).

Lavner, Bradbury, and Karney (2012) also found that among couples who divorce, a pattern of starting off with significant problems in marriage is more common than a pattern of relationship deterioration in the early years of marriage. They found that about 40% of men and 30% of women report starting off their marriages at moderate to low levels of satisfaction and conclude that these patterns “are potent antecedents of relationship deterioration” (p. 606). Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, James (2015) found substantial variation in levels of happiness and (especially) conflict at the beginning of the marriage among women who eventually divorced, and these levels remained remarkably stable over the course of the marriage. In some instances, there was accelerating decline in marital quality near the end of the marriage, especially for those who started their marriage at the lowest levels of quality. But James concludes that many of the problems that lead to an eventual divorce are present throughout the marriage. Some couples have significant problems but still report high levels of satisfaction over the first few years of marriage. Nevertheless, one study found that 15% of couples satisfied with their marriages early on divorced by 10 years, but these divorces were predicted by higher levels of negative communication from the beginning of the marriage (Lavner & Bradbury, 2012). Theoretically, then, youth relationship education could help many individuals make better relationship formation decisions and perhaps help couples improve relationship quality before a marriage occurs.

The Challenges of Helping Distressed Couples

If distressed couples readily sought professional help, there would be less reason for concern about the significant deficits and problems that many couples bring to marriage. Unfortunately, research shows that distressed couples usually do not seek counseling before divorcing, and when they do, it is usually after a crisis point that makes successful intervention harder (Lebow, Chambers, Christensen, & Johnson, 2012). According to one recent study with a nationally representative sample of individuals who had been thinking about divorce, only a quarter reported seeing a marriage counselor together (National Divorce Decision-making Project, 2015). Only about 15% talked to a religious leader. About 10% reported taking a marriage-strengthening class. And while a large body of research suggests that educational interventions can strengthen couple relationships, the effects are generally modest (and critics have questioned even these modest effects [Johnson & Bradbury, 2015]). Distressed couples often do not seek out professional help and when they do it is often after a long period of distress when dysfunctional patterns become harder to change. This should not diminish the crucial work of practitioners, but it acknowledges that their skills are underused, their work is challenging, and distressed couples do not seek help early, when intervention is more successful.

Early Evidence Base for Youth Relationship Education

The CRE field needs to give more priority to helping young people understand healthy dating and relationship formation behavior. The road from adolescence to marital formation is long with many barriers and risks. When young people enter into marriage or long-term committed relationships, too often they begin with deficits that make sustaining those unions hard. However, if the field is going to shift its priorities, we should check if there is any evidence that educational programs targeted to adolescents and young adults, rather than committed couples, can help them avoid the problems that make it harder to achieve their aspirations of a healthy, stable marriage. Research on this point is limited as yet, but a growing body of early work in this area provides some reason for optimism.

Halpern-Meekin (2011) examined the impact of various YRE curricula on high school students in Florida and Oklahoma in a quasi-experimental study. Overall, she found significant, positive change in students' relationship skills. These changes were moderated, however, by a number of factors: students in two-parent families showed stronger gains; those in severely economically disadvantaged areas showed little gain; mandated classes produced stronger gains than self-selected classes. Some of the most rigorous YRE outcome research to date has been conducted by Kerpelman and her colleagues (Kerpelman, Pittman, Adler-Baeder, Eryigit, & Paulk, 2009; Kerpelman et al., 2010). They analyzed data collected from more than 1,400 lower income and racially diverse high school students in 39 public schools across Alabama. Health classes were randomly assigned to receive either the *Relationship Smarts Plus (RS+)* curriculum (treatment group) or not (treatment-as-usual control group). Results at 1 year after the program showed that students in the *RS+* health classes decreased more in their faulty belief that "love is enough" and increased more in their conflict-management skills compared to students in the control-group classes. These improvements in faulty beliefs were not moderated by race/ethnicity or family structure. Improvements in conflict-management skills were found for students in less advantaged groups, but not the more advantaged groups. In another report using this same sample of youth, researchers reported an encouraging finding that students who received the *RS+* program increased their disapproval of using aggression in dating relationships and, more important, that these attitudes were related to reports of less use of physical aggression in their dating relationships 2 years later (Kerpelman, 2012).

In addition, there is some intriguing evidence that YRE can reduce teen pregnancy rates. An innovative relationship literacy and sexuality curriculum, *Love Notes*, focuses on the head and heart as well as body parts and health risk prevention. It empowers youth with more effective ways to navigate their romantic relationships and make intentional, future-oriented decisions rather than drifting through sex and parenthood. In a rigorous evaluation study, youth who participated in the *Love Notes* treatment group were significantly less likely at 6 months post-treatment to have had sex, had fewer sex partners, and were less likely to get pregnant compared to control-group youth (Barbee, Cunningham, van Zyl, Antle, & Langley, 2016).

Preventing more premarital pregnancies should reduce an important barrier to forming healthy marriages.

A few studies have targeted YRE programs for dating young adults. One of the most popular programs is *Premarital Interpersonal Choices and Knowledge (P.I.C.K.)* (known more by its popular title *How to Avoid Falling for a Jerk/Jerkette*). One study assessed its potential effectiveness with 18- to 25-year-olds (nearly 700) and a nonequivalent comparison group (Bradford, Stewart, Pfister, & Higginbotham, 2016). These researchers found that *P.I.C.K.* improved knowledge in several domains about forming healthy relationships, although they were not able to follow up over time to assess actual relationship formation outcomes. In addition, nonexperimental studies of the effectiveness of the PREP-based *Within My Reach* program with low-income, at-risk young adults have found small-to-modest positive changes in such outcomes as beliefs about healthy relationships, as well as improved communication and conflict-management skills, and reduced relationship violence (Antle et al., 2013; Antle, Karam, Christensen, Barbee, & Sar, 2011; Visvanathan, Richmond, Winder, & Koenck, 2015). Also, a recent study of emerging adults attending 4-year colleges randomized volunteer participants to a modified, face-to-face *PREP* curriculum, or to an online *ePREP* program, or to a control group (Holt et al., 2016). These researchers found participants in the treatment conditions significantly decreased maladaptive relationship beliefs over time; control-group participants showed no change.

This body of evaluation research is still young and we do not yet have studies with long-term outcomes. So there is a much more work to do in this emerging YRE field. Still, while we wait for a more mature body of work, the early work is showing benefits in important proximal outcomes such as reductions in relationship violence and ability to resist peer pressures. Of course, even if YRE proves effective, it will not make much impact unless the field can get it to much larger numbers of youth. Fortunately, federal funding for YRE programs over the past decade has increased the number of disadvantaged students who now have access to YRE (Scott & Karberg, 2015), but those numbers must still grow significantly.

What About Premarital Couple Education?

I have been arguing for the need to give a greater proportion of effort to individually oriented relationship education for adolescents and young adults rather than to education for intact couples. As mentioned earlier, however, I still believe there is merit to couple-oriented education, especially to premarital couple education as a capstone to young people's romantic relationship journeys. Various studies estimate that only about 30%–40% of engaged couples participate in some form of marriage preparation education (e.g., Rhoades & Stanley, 2014; Stanley et al., 2006), but even this figure likely overestimates the amount of high-quality premarital education (Wilmoth & Smyser, 2012). As outlined in this article, the kinds of relationship experiences that couples bring to the altar and the need for many of them to deal with significant problems and issues as they enter into marriage argue for a

rededication to reaching more engaged couples with evidence-based premarital couple education. A solid body of evidence documents that premarital couple education can be effective (Fawcett et al., 2010) and reduce the risk of divorce in the early years of marriage (Hahlweg, Markman, Thurmeir, Engel, & Eckert, 1998; Nock, Sanchez, & Wright, 2008; Stanley et al., 2006), although more work is needed to test its effectiveness for more disadvantaged engaged couples. In addition, another benefit of premarital education is that it appears to increase substantially the likelihood that couples will seek marital counseling during their marriage, and this is especially so for more disadvantaged couples (Doss, Rhoades, Stanley, Markman, & Johnson, 2009; Williamson, Trail, Bradbury, & Karney, 2014). These programs may need some changes and improvements to deal with challenges and issues that are more common to modern relationships (Randles, 2017), but program developers are up to this task. So I cap my call for greater investment in individually oriented YRE with a parallel hope that we will become more effective at reaching and helping engaged couples be better prepared for marital success.

Implications for Practice and Policy

I have argued that the CRE field needs to give more priority to relationship education for adolescents and young adults to help them make better relationship choices, so that they will be better able to realize their aspirations for a healthy marriage and stable family. In effect, this would move the CRE field upstream and closer to its intended roots in universal and targeted prevention (Halford, 2011). We know that a significant proportion of couples who seek CRE already are experiencing high levels of distress (Bradford, Hawkins, & Acker, 2015). YRE emphasizes intervening early to prevent dysfunction rather than ameliorate problems that already threaten the viability of a relationship. I conclude, then, by briefly outlining some implications of such a shift for the field and for policy makers.

First, government and private funders that support CRE efforts need to give greater priority to YRE. It appears that more attention has been directed this way over the past decade (Scott & Karberg, 2015), but much more is needed. Government funding for rigorous evaluation research of YRE programs for youth has been limited to date. The Administration for Children and Families, which has funded a handful of large-scale, multisite, rigorous evaluation studies of CRE programs for at-risk couples, has been slow to invest resources in large-scale, long-term, multisite, randomized controlled trials of the effectiveness of YRE. Such studies would be expensive and challenging, so ACF likely is the best candidate to support this needed research.

In addition, if good research can establish the merits of YRE, then schools need to step up and create the capacity to deliver it to youth in large numbers, to make relationships if not the fourth R in school curricula (Fincham, 2012), then at least a common and valued element of school curricula. Admittedly, asking schools to step up to meet this need will be challenging in an era of increased attention to STEM education, tight budgets, and teacher shortages. Some have argued, however, that

this can be done most efficiently by integrating YRE into schools' health curricula with mandated classes that reach large numbers of students (Stanley, Rhoades, & Fincham, 2011) rather than in family and consumer sciences classes that reach limited numbers of students. Of course, we should not minimize the significant operational challenges to effective YRE in schools. Training teachers to be effective in delivering curricula will require intensive, smart, ongoing efforts to reduce the gap between programs as they are designed and how they are delivered at scale on the ground. College programs, especially those in health education, family and consumer sciences, family studies, human development, psychology, and social work could help by training their graduates in evidence-based YRE curricula and how to work effectively with young people dealing with romantic relationships. Also, YRE is likely to be most effective when delivered in multiple doses across the adolescent years rather than in a one-time inoculation. Given how early problems can begin in romantic relationships, starting these doses in early adolescence makes sense rather than waiting until the later years of high school. This means that curricula will need to be developmentally appropriate, another significant challenge that program developers need to address.

Placing all the burden on schools for delivering YRE to youth would not be wise, however. YRE content can be sensitive and controversial; some school boards, administrators, and legislators may balk at greater involvement despite the arguments presented here. Accordingly, we should also ask religious organizations to take on the challenge of providing YRE. Religious settings may be more successful in involving parents in the educational process to support youth learning. Also, community organizations that provide positive youth development programs could do more to integrate YRE into their curricula. Many of these programs already have shown potential for positive indirect effects on disadvantaged young adults' family formation decisions by giving them positive alternatives and hope at a crucial point in the life span (DeLuca, Clampet-Lundquist, & Edin, 2016). Adding direct curricula on healthy relationship formation to these youth development programs may increase the potential for positive effects. Finally, there is an important role to play for community colleges, which often serve more disadvantaged and higher-risk young adults. College courses on romantic relationships can be very popular; effective courses may help many chart safer and more satisfying paths to healthy relationships. Academics could help in all of these challenges by devoting their research resources to evaluating the effectiveness of these programs on the ground and not just in carefully controlled efficacy trials.

Finally, I suggest to the field a change in the generic term commonly used to describe the field. I recommend that the field use RE (relationship education) rather than CRE (couple and relationship education), with YRE (youth relationship education) and CRE (couple relationship education) as specific subfields. Removing the C from CRE clarifies that the field is much broader than providing valued relationship education to intact couples; it encompasses the important work of individually oriented relationship literacy education for youth and young adults. Perhaps this small change in how we refer to the field will spur greater attention to the need to

allocate a greater proportion of our resources to healthy relationship formation for young people, to help them better navigate the challenging roads to forming healthy relationships and stable marriages.

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