

**Exploratory Study of
Low-Income Couples'
Decision Making
Processes:**

**OMB Supporting
Statement for Data
Collection**

Section B

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Submitted by

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Administration for Children and Families
Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation
7th floor, West, Aerospace Center Building
370 L'Enfant Promenade, SW
Washington, DC 20447

Project Officer:
Seth Chamberlain

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B. COLLECTION OF INFORMATION EMPLOYING STATISTICAL METHODS

1. Respondent Universe and Sampling Methods

To conduct this exploratory study of low-income couples' decision making we will recruit couples from a single geographic area (Seattle, Washington) to take part in a structured telephone interview and an in-home assessment using sophisticated and detailed data collection methods. Our goal is to collect complete data--a telephone interview for each member of the couple (80 interviews) and a home visit with the couple together--for 40 couples. We expect that of the couples we contact and determine are eligible for the study, we will obtain complete data for 85 percent.

Low-income couples will be identified and recruited primarily through community-based organizations in a single site (i.e. Seattle).¹ To implement this approach, MPR and RRI staff will work with local community-based organizations (CBOs) serving low-income families in Seattle. Interested individuals will be referred via a "consent to contact" form (Appendix F), which will authorize MPR to contact the client. During that initial telephone contact, staff will aim to confirm eligibility and administer the short telephone survey. Prior to administering the survey, however, staff will explain the need to involve both members of the couple in the study and assess the potential willingness of the respondent's partner to be involved. Telephone interviewers will also describe the in-home observation to participants at the time of the telephone interview; this information will be repeated at the time of the in-home visit, and at that time the participants will be asked to read and sign an informed consent form prior to participation in the observation component.

An eligibility screener will be administered prior to the telephone interview. We will apply the following criteria in order to obtain a sample relevant to the population served by ACF programs:

- **Income level.** To ensure that we obtain a low-income sample, the eligibility screener will ask the female partner whether she has received public assistance or other benefits such as Medicaid, WIC, Food Stamps, or subsidized school lunch for herself or her children in the last 12 months. Eligibility will depend on the female rather than the male's receipt of such benefits, since relatively few men receive them even though they may have low income.
- **Relationship Status.** Our goal will be to recruit enough couples to obtain an approximately even division of married and unmarried couples to enable comparisons between these two groups. We will exclude couples who are not co-residential or who have been together as a couple for less than three months to ensure that we recruit people who are in romantic relationships (rather than just friends, for example). Individuals who are very new to each other or who do not cohabit are more likely than others to be somewhat tentative or unstable, which could affect their

¹ If recruitment does not proceed at a rate which will meet the data collection schedule, we will employ supplemental recruitment strategies including targeting families who are currently involved with social services by obtaining permission to use administrative information from agencies such as TANF, Medicaid, Food Stamps, or Women, Infants and Children (WIC) to contact recipients. An additional potential recruitment method is strategic advertising to inform interested couples of opportunities to participate in the study.

decision making. Although these groups are also of interest, we do not include them in this study because the small sample size prohibits multiple subgroup comparisons.

- **Parental Status.** Families with children and expectant parents are the population most likely to be served by ACF programs, and the well-being of children is a major motivation behind the interest in couple functioning. For this reason, we will include an eligibility criterion for parental status. We will recruit couples in which at least one partner has a co-residential biological child.
- **Age.** Eligibility for this study will be restricted to couples in which both partners are at least 18 years of age.
- **Participation in Other Studies.** The sample for this study will exclude couples who are part of the evaluation sample of other ongoing related studies such as Supporting Healthy Marriage or other Healthy Marriage Initiative and Responsible Fatherhood programs active in the Seattle metro area.
- **English Language Ability.** Due to the exploratory nature of this study and relatively small sample size, it is not feasible to conduct the telephone interviews and observation discussions in languages other than English. Therefore, we will only recruit couples who can complete the telephone interview and observation tasks in English.
- **Absence of Couple Violence.** We will employ a two-step method to avoid engaging couples with pre-existing domestic violence in the conflict discussion. In the telephone interview, we will ask the female partner two items to identify whether domestic violence may be an issue in her relationship. These items will be embedded in a list of questions about conflict management. If this screen is positive, the couple will be told they are not eligible for the study and the woman will be offered resources such as hotline numbers and shelter information. We will also administer a full screener to the female during the home visit. If the home visit screener suggests that there is domestic violence in the relationship, the conflict discussion will not be administered. The female will be provided with information and resources for attaining safety. The domestic violence screener and protocol were developed in consultation with a domestic violence expert external to the research team.

2. Procedures for the Collection of Information

a. General Data Collection Plans

The specific data to be collected will be obtained from a structured telephone interview and an in-home observation of specific activities. More detail on the conceptual model and data collection tasks can be found in Appendix A.

1. **Telephone Interview.** To gather information on the context of couples lives (e.g. factors such as education level and beliefs in gendered stereotypes that are hypothesized to relate to decision making), MPR will conduct a 20 minute structured

telephone interview with each member of the couple individually. Appendix A contains a table of the measures by broad constructs and source; Appendix B contains the full survey instrument.

2. **Observation of Couple Interaction.** To collect data on couples' processes and outcomes we will ask couples to participate in an in-home observation. A number of activities will be included in the home observation including:

- An oral history interview which lays the foundation for the observation of partners' interaction. Each couple will also be separated for a short questionnaire on behavioral preferences (e.g. preferences for who should clean house) and more sensitive questions (e.g. questions on use of illegal substances). Women will be screened for domestic violence in private during this time.
- A paper tower exercise which requires that the couple construct a free-standing tower together (this exercise is videotaped and later coded).
- An economic decision task which asks couples to negotiate how to spend a hypothesized lottery winning of \$5,000.
- A conflict discussion which involves couples engaging in a discussion about a topic that has caused disagreement in the past (this activity is videotaped)
- Collection of psychophysiological data, such as heart rate, during the conflict discussion.
- A video recall activity which asks couples to individually review the videotaped discussion and rate how they felt about it.

Specific protocols for the in-home observation and instruments are presented in Appendix C.

b. Statistical Methods for Sample Selection and Degree of Accuracy Needed

Due to the nature of this exploratory study, it is not necessary that the sample design be either nationally or locally representative, but rather be generally reflective of the population served by ACF programs and related services. The study is expected to provide preliminary information about decision making among low income couples, and if promising, suggest hypotheses related to specific policy or program changes that could subsequently be tested with larger and more representative samples. The ultimate aim is to determine whether and how ACF or ACF grantees may improve their services by taking into account the effects of partner influences on the decisions and actions of the individuals it serves.

The in-depth nature of data collection planned for the study also limits the number of couples that would be practical to study. We will study approximately 40 couples in total. To examine differences by marital status, we will recruit an approximately even mix of married and unmarried couples.

To facilitate the observational component of the study, which will be conducted by RRI in Seattle, we propose selecting a sample of couples who reside in and around that city. Although the direct observations will occur in couples' homes, the equipment needed to conduct the observations would make it costly and inefficient to carry out this component in areas far from RRI's laboratory.

c. Unusual Problems Requiring Specialized Sampling Procedures

There are no unusual problems requiring specialized sampling procedures.

d. Periodic Cycles to Reduce Burden

There will be no use of periodic data collection cycles for this study.

3. Methods to Maximize Response Rates and to Deal with Nonresponse

For the telephone survey, interviewing will take place at MPR's centralized telephone interviewing facility. Telephone interviewers and observers will be selected based on past experience and performance in comparable studies with demonstrated skills in communication and encouraging response among individuals who may be reluctant to participate. Interviewers and observers will be prepared to address common respondent concerns, such as:

- What is this study about? Why should I participate?
- Is this a voluntary study?
- How long will the interview and observation take?
- Will this affect my participation in other programs, such as social service programs?
- What will be done with the information I give you? Is this confidential?

Reluctant respondents will be sent a letter emphasizing the importance of the study, tailored to address their concerns. They will then be re-contacted at a later date by a refusal conversion specialist. Given that many sample members will find the subject matter of this study appealing, we do not expect that refusals to participate will present a significant challenge.

To encourage response to the observation component, interviews will be conducted in the couples' home to minimize respondent burden. Past experience suggests that most couples find the observation tasks to be interesting and enjoyable. Additionally, we will use a tiered post-paid payment to secure sufficiently high response rates for the telephone survey and in-home assessment (\$10 per individual member of the couple to participate in the structured interview

and \$40 per individual for the observation); therefore couples will receive a total of \$100 for completing both components of the data collection. Payments will be administered at the time of the home visit for couples who participate in both components. Payments will be mailed to those who participate in the telephone survey only. All participants will be clearly informed during both components that participation is completely voluntary.

4. Tests of Procedures and Methods to be Undertaken

In designing the instruments, we drew heavily on questions and instruments used successfully in previous studies such as the BSF and FF evaluations. Consequently, most of the survey questions have been thoroughly tested on large samples with prior OMB approval. In addition, the survey instrument will be pretested with nine respondents to determine what problems respondents might have in providing the requested information and to make appropriate changes to the questionnaires, as needed. The proposed observational measures and methods have been used in numerous prior studies and have shown to have good reliability and predictive validity.

5. Individuals Consulted on Statistical Aspects of the Design

The following persons were consulted on the study design, data collection methodology, and data analyses:

- Robin Dion, Mathematica Policy Research, (202) 484-5262
- John Gottman, Relationship Research Institute, University of Washington, (206) 832-0305
- Shelly Lundberg, University of Washington (206) 543-6149

MPR will collect the structured telephone survey data and RRI will collect the observational data. Both MPR and RRI will participate in data analysis and report writing.

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