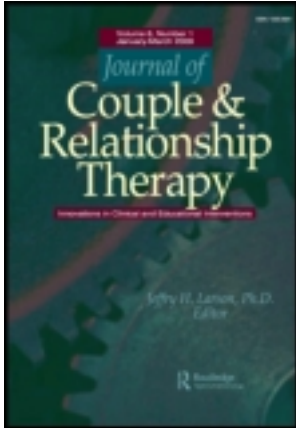


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### Processes of Change in Relationship Education for Lower-Income African American Couples

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## **Processes of Change in Relationship Education for Lower-Income African American Couples**

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*The current study examined 181 lower income unmarried African American couples who were expecting or had a child (3 months or younger). All couples received couple relationship education (PREP). We examined whether changes in communication quality and perceived social integration were related to changes in relationship satisfaction and dedication and whether these associations were consistent for men and women. The results demonstrated that men's and women's change in positive communication and social integration were related to higher ratings of their own dedication and relationship satisfaction. Men reported more relationship satisfaction when their partner's negative communication decreased and when their partner reported more social integration; however, there was no association between women's rating of relationship satisfaction and men's changes in negative communication or social integration.*

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**KEYWORDS** *relationship education, African American, lower income, race, communication, dedication, relationship satisfaction, PREP*

## INTRODUCTION

Couple relationship education (CRE) programs have emerged as one approach to assist couples in protecting their relationship from common risk factors, such as negative communication patterns associated with relationship distress (i.e., negative communication) as well as to enhance couples' commitment and positive connections. A recent meta-analysis revealed CRE programs conducted with primarily Euro American/White couples have produced small to moderate positive changes in couples' communication quality and relationship adjustment (Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2008). Additionally, research has supported the use of CRE programs with lower socioeconomic status (SES) and racial/ethnic couples (Hawkins & Fackrell, 2010). Despite this attention, fewer studies have explored what processes are associated with couples' improvement in CRE programs, with a few notable exceptions. For instance, Schilling, Baucom, Burnett, Allen, and Ragland (2003) and Stanley, Rhoades, Olmos-Gallo, and Markman (2007) found men's decreases in negative communication and increases in positive communication were associated with higher relationship satisfaction; however, changes in women's negative communication were not related to later relationship adjustment. There is some debate about changes in women's positive communication in the prediction of later relationship functioning (see Schilling et al., 2003, and Stanley et al., 2007). Accordingly, we sought to extend this line of inquiry by exploring two potential change processes in the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP, Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 2010a)—communication quality and social integration—that may be associated with positive gains in lower-income African American couples' relationship quality and dedication.

PREP is a widely used CRE program and its theoretical foundation rests within cognitive-behavioral couple therapy approaches and is informed by empirical data on couples' functioning and prevention studies (Markman et al., 2010a). In particular, PREP focuses on reducing risk factors associated with separation and relationship discord (e.g., negative communication), while increasing protective factors, such as increasing friendship and community supports. Most of the research supporting the efficacy and effectiveness of PREP has been conducted with primarily Euro American/White couples (e.g., Halford, Sanders, & Behrens, 2001; Stanley et al., 2001). However, data on the effectiveness of PREP and variants of PREP with more diverse samples are emerging. For instance, PREP has been shown to be effective in studies with ethnically diverse samples of Army couples and

correctional inmates as well as studies with only African American couples (Beach, Hurt, Fincham, Franklin, McNair, & Stanley, 2011; Einhorn, Williams, Stanley, Wunderlin, Markman, & Eason, 2009; Stanley et al., 2005). Markman et al. (2004) suggested in the dissemination of the PREP, the leaders who deliver the relationship education ideally should have knowledge of the sociopolitical dynamics affecting the target community as well as a connection to the target community. The current study used these strategies.

### Lower SES African American Couples

Social ecological systems models (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1986) have been applied to couple and family interventions with African Americans (e.g., Szapocznik & Williams, 2000). These models account for macrosystemic processes, such as institutionalized discrimination and racism, on couples' relationship functioning. For instance, the turbulent history of slavery endemic to African Americans in the United States has not only had a significant impact on general socialization experiences but also presents unique challenges to African Americans' intimate relationships (see Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Kelly, 2003). African Americans couples' who experience more oppression and racism also report worse communication quality and increased relational aggression (e.g., Kelly & Floyd, 2006; LaTaillade, 2006). To further complicate matters, African Americans encounter lower employment rates (Tucker & Mitchell-Kerman, 1985) and are subsequently overrepresented in lower SES compared to Euro Americans/Whites. Limited economic resources can strain couples' ability to provide basic necessities for their families and the communities for these couples typically are suboptimal (e.g., high levels of crime, poor school systems)—all of these economically related stressors have been related to increased personal distress and relational discord (Conger & Elder, 1994; Hatchett, Veroff, & Douvan, 1995; Stanley, Markman, & Jenkins, 2004). Collectively, these experiences undoubtedly present lower SES African American couples with stress that may subsequently influence how couples cope and communicate within intimate relationships.

Couples' positive and negative communication patterns can influence the degree to which partners are able to engage in pro-relational tasks (e.g., deepening emotional bonds, friendship, dates) and couples' communication can influence their own and their partners' relationship satisfaction later in the relationship (e.g., Conger, Conger, & Martin, 2010; Fincham, 2004; Markman, Rhoades, Stanley, Ragan, & Whitton, 2010b). How changes in African American men's and women's communication quality affect their own and their partners' perception of relationship functioning is less understood. To contextualize this discussion we will focus on the sociocultural norms and intergenerational transmission of communication for African Americans.

Although within the African American community males and females are both equally valued, the frequent saying “raise your daughters, love your sons” implies different socialization experiences. Understanding these different socialization experiences among African American males and females is particularly important from a family systems perspective since balancing both gender and cultural expectations is endemic to most ethnic minority couples and something that is paramount for effective couples’ interventions. “Love your sons” implies familial attempts to protect African American males from the societal discrimination that they often face. For instance, African American males often face the fear of being mislabeled as “aggressive” or “macho,” which can deter many African American males from reaching adulthood (e.g., racial profiling, discrimination, Black-on-Black crime; Boyd-Franklin, 2003). As such, the sense of powerlessness and subsequent anger that often emerge as a result of continued oppression, racism, and discrimination in African American males may be subsequently manifested within intimate relationships with African American women (e.g., feeling ineffectual or disconnected or being critical). The “raise your daughters” implies the familial solidarity, independence, and assertiveness that are often expected in African American females as many African American women report an inconsistent or absent father figures in their lives (Boyd-Franklin, 2003). The intergenerational communication processes of parental figures can have an influence on couples’ current relationships (e.g., Sanders, Halford, & Behrens, 1999). For instance, African American women who report exposure to a parental egalitarian marriage had more realistic views of relational role responsibilities and more positive communication and conflict resolution skills (Boyd-Franklin, 2003). Accordingly, African American men’s and women’s perceptions of their relationship quality may be enhanced through their own and their partner’s increases in positive communication behaviors that aim to provide support and validation.

Collectivistic cultural values are integral to the identity of most African Americans and their social networks (such as extended families) have been a cornerstone in the African American community to provide support, kinship, and help shape one’s identity (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Hatchett & Jackson, 1992; McCabe, Clark, & Barnett, 1999; Murry, Bynum, Brody, Willert, & Stephens, 2001). As such, it is imperative to transcend our scope from the conventional notion of nuclear families when discussing African American families. Indeed, African American families have been historically interdependent on extended social support and kin networks (Hatchett & Jackson, 1992; McCabe et al., 1999; Murry et al., 2001) and these networks often insulate African Americans from negative psychological outcomes (McCabe et al., 1999; Yap, Settles, & Pratt-Hyatt, 2011). Given that couples relationships do not exist in a vacuum, the degree to which a couple feels connected to and supported by others can increase intra- and inter-personal functioning (e.g., Pinsof, 1995). One tenet of the PREP curriculum is to promote healthy

community and social support systems (Markman et al., 2010a). Conceptually, as couples become socially integrated with others through providing and receiving support, their couple identity may be strengthened and they may find increased support to manage parental demands (e.g., child-rearing) as well as increases in pro-relational activities (e.g., fun and friendship) (Amato, Booth, Johnson, & Rogers, 2007).

## Hypotheses

The current study examined lower SES African American couples who participated in PREP. We expected that increases in men's and women's positive communication and decreases in negative communication would be related to higher relationship satisfaction and dedication scores after the program (hypotheses 1 and 2). Additionally, we posited that increases in social integration would be related to higher relationship satisfaction and dedication scores after the program (hypothesis 3). Given the lack of empirical data on lower SES African American couples, we did not make any predictions regarding the relative influence of men's (or women's) changes in communication quality or social integration on their partner's perceptions of relationship satisfaction or dedication scores. For example, it is feasible that as women increase their positive communication, men's relationship satisfaction would improve (or vice versa).

## METHOD

### Participants

A total of 362 individuals (181 couples) participated in this study. All couples identified as African American, heterosexual, and currently unmarried and they all had at least one child or were expecting or had a child (3 months or younger). Couples received PREP either in a group format (multiple couples with co-leaders;  $n = 110$  individuals, 55 couples) or in a couple format (one couple plus one leader;  $n = 252$  individuals, 126 couples). Due to the naturalistic treatment setting, assignment to the specific format was not randomized. Beyond sex, race/ethnicity, and current marital status, we were able to collect only limited demographic information from the participants. However, we know the general economic levels for the neighborhood communities where the participants were recruited. In the eight Chicago neighborhood communities, 45% to 71% of individuals were considered low income (less than \$38,622 household income) and the median income in these neighborhoods was very low (range = \$4,096 to \$12,480; MCIC, 2010).

The participants were recruited from social services agencies in the local Chicago area. The retention rate for the current study was 90.1% of

individuals ( $N = 326$ ). For the 36 participants who did not complete the post-assessment, we carried forward their pre-assessment score (suggesting no change, which is commonly referred to as intent-to-treat [ITT] analysis; see Atkins, 2009). By doing an ITT analysis, the implied assumption is that participants who did not complete the program also did not change from their pre-assessment scores. The ITT approach has many strengths and weaknesses. In regard to strengths, ITT analysis provides information about the complete sample, even those who may have dropped out. There were no significant differences on pre-assessment measures between those who were not retained versus those who were retained on all of the measures ( $ps > .05$ ). Further, in the estimation of pre–post changes, an ITT analysis will provide a more conservative estimate compared to eliminating those participants from the study. In regard to the weaknesses, the ITT analysis assumes that participants who dropped out did not get worse over the course of the study. There were also 24 participants who had missing data for the relationship satisfaction measure (at pre and post) and they were excluded from those analyses. There was no missing data for the scaled scores for the other variables.

## Procedures

Couples were recruited from social service agencies, clinics, community centers, and park districts in the local area (Chicago), wherein the PREP leaders (from a local mental health agency) had strong relationships with community partners. Leaders recruited couples through community meetings, distributing brochures, and talking to members of the community. To reduce barriers for attendance, childcare, food, and transportation reimbursement were provided to families. Couples who completed the 16-hour PREP program received a certificate of completion and a \$25 gift card for participant support costs.

The pre-assessment measures were collected prior to the first meeting and the post-assessment measures were collected at the conclusion of the last meeting. This assessment process mirrors what has been done in psychotherapy research for decades. Couples completed the measures in separate rooms to ensure that their answers were not influenced by one another and to maintain confidentiality. Of the 181 couples, 87 were also included in Owen, Quirk, Inch, France and Bergen (2011); however, the purposes of the two studies were different.

## Couple Relationship Education Program

PREP was delivered over the course of 16 hours through couple sessions or group-based relationship education workshops. Both programs addressed the principles in the PREP curriculum, such as promoting healthy



communication and effective problem-solving strategies as well as learning strategies to increase protective factors (e.g., enhancing dedication, promoting forgiveness) to assist couples develop healthy relationships. The group-based sessions typically used a male-female co-facilitating team in the workshops and typically had three to eight couples in each group and were offered at various convenient locations throughout the community. The couple format was conducted at the home of the couple or at a common meeting place (e.g., the community agency) with one PREP leader and one couple. For both formats, sessions lasted between 1 and 2 hours each depending on availability, and they typically occurred weekly until the couple has successfully graduated from the program. The complete PREP program was conducted over the course of 2 to 3 months (approximately eight sessions). During the week between the workshops/sessions, the staff conducted follow-up calls with the couples, thanked them for coming to the session, answered any questions they might have, and reminded them of the next workshop. PREP leaders noted that couples gained a personal connection with the staff and this effort may have increased retention rates.

The PREP leaders were paraprofessionals who received the standard 3-day training from the PREP institute. They used the PREP manual and supporting materials (e.g., handouts, role-play demonstrations) to structure the workshops; however, given the naturalistic nature of the study, there were no measures of fidelity. All PREP leaders identified as racial/ethnic minorities and all worked in the target communities (e.g., schools, medical clinics, churches, and social service organizations). As such, they were familiar with the barriers that many of participants face on a regular basis such as unemployment, having a criminal record, poor school systems, and violent communities. They used this knowledge and understanding to cater the lessons outlined in the PREP curriculum to make the workshop related to the situations couples may be facing (i.e., changed examples to fit the participants but did not alter the main content).

## Measures

### DEDICATION

Couples' perceptions of their interpersonal dedication to their partner were one of two primary outcome measures in this study. The dedication subscale has four items—adapted from the Commitment Inventory (Stanley & Markman, 1992)—that assesses the degree to which couples feel an interpersonal commitment to the future of the relationship, couple identity, and primacy of the relationship. An example item is: “My relationship with my partner is more important to me than almost anything else in my life.” The items were rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*), with higher scores indicating more dedication. The validity of the

dedication subscale has been shown in several studies (Einhorn et al., 2008; Owen, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2011). In the current study, Cronbach alpha was .80 at pre-assessment and .91 at post-assessment.

#### RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION

The second outcome measure in the current study was a one-item relationship satisfaction measure from the General Social Survey: "All things considered how happy are you with your present relationship?" This item was rated on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (*Very Unhappy*) to 7 (*Perfectly Happy*).

#### POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE COMMUNICATION QUALITY

The Communication Skills Test (C. C. Saiz and N. Jenkins, unpublished measure, University of Denver, 1996) was originally a 32-item measure developed to assess positive and negative communication quality. We used five items to assess positive communication quality and six items to assess negative communication quality. Example items for positive and negative communication quality include: "When our talks begin to get out of hand, we agree to stop them and talk later" and "We have arguments that erupt over minor events," respectively. These items were rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*), with higher scores indicating more positive and negative communication, respectively. The 5-item version of the positive relationship quality scale was used in Einhorn et al. (2008). Moreover, the reliability and validity of the CST have been supported in prior studies (Stanley et al., 2001, 2005). In the current study, the Cronbach alphas for positive communication quality at pre- and post-assessment were .91 and .91, respectively. The Cronbach alphas for negative communication quality at pre- and post-assessment was .83 and .92, respectively.

#### SOCIAL INTEGRATION

The social integration (SI) scale assesses the degree to which individuals feel as a couple they are connected to other people. These items were newly developed by Stanley et al. (2007) and conceptually they reflect core systemic principles that couples' relationships can affect and be affected by their larger social networks (Amato, Booth, Johnson, & Rogers, 2007; Pinsof, 1995). In this way, the SI scale assesses aspects of couple strength and general social functioning. The four items are: "Many of our friends are friends of both of us"; "If we were to need help getting by or encountered a crisis, we would have friends or family to rely on"; and "We know of people who care about us and our relationship," and "As a couple we try to help others in need." The SI scale has four items, which were rated on a 3-point scale: 1 (*False*), 2

(*Somewhat True*), or 3 (*True*). Cronbach alphas at pre- and post-assessment were .69 and .78, respectively.

## Data Analysis

We examined whether changes in individual's and their partner's positive communication, negative communication, and social integration (pre–post) were related to their reports of dedication and relationship satisfaction at post, after controlling for their pre-dedication and relationship satisfaction scores. The change score for communication quality and social integration was calculated by subtracting participant's pre score from their post score. We conducted two multilevel models (individuals nested within couples) using the actor-partner interdependence analytical method (APIM; Kashy & Kenny, 2000). APIM estimates the mutual relationship between partners while accounting for the interdependence between their scores. That is, we simultaneously tested whether men's and women's changes in communication quality and social integration were associated with their own and their partner's dedication and relationship satisfaction scores at post-assessment. For example, a decrease in women's negative communication may be positively associated with their own ratings of relationship satisfaction and may be also positively associated with their partner's ratings of relationship satisfaction.

We conducted two models wherein dedication and relationship satisfaction were the dependent variables, respectively. The level 1 predictor variables were individuals' and their partners' change in communication quality (positive and negative) and social integration, individuals' pre-scores for dedication and relationship satisfaction, respectively (all these variables were grand-mean centered) and gender (coded 1 for men and  $-1$  for women; uncentered). We also included the gender  $\times$  change score (i.e., positive communication, negative communication, and social integration) to test for gender interactions in the prediction of the dedication and relationship satisfaction. Format (coded 1 for couple and  $-1$  for group; uncentered) was the only level 2 predictor variable. The multilevel models were analyzed by the statistical package Hierarchical Linear Modeling Version-6 (Raudenbush, Bryk, Cheong, & Congdon, 2005).

## RESULTS

### Preliminary Results

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and effect sizes for the variables by gender at pre- and post-assessment. Couples reported large-sized gains for all of the variables in the study. We initially tested whether men and women would differ in their pre- and post-assessment scores for the

**TABLE 1** Descriptive Data for the Variables in the Study by Gender

Variables	Women		<i>d</i>	Men		<i>d</i>
	Pre	Post		Pre	Post	
Dedication	4.31 (1.29)	5.86 (1.19)	1.20	4.16 (1.23)	5.72 (1.07)	1.26
Rel. Satisfaction	3.41 (1.74)	5.53 (1.05)	1.22	3.37 (1.53)	5.55 (0.91)	1.42
Positive Com.	3.06 (1.40)	5.51 (1.12)	1.75	3.00 (1.38)	5.41 (1.11)	1.75
Negative Com.	4.39 (1.22)	3.18 (1.44)	-0.99	4.38 (1.22)	3.22 (1.48)	-0.95
Social Integ.	1.93 (0.47)	2.35 (0.50)	0.89	1.94 (0.47)	2.33 (0.55)	0.83

Note. *d* = 0.20 small-sized effect, 0.50 = medium-sized effect, 0.80 = large-sized effect. Effect sizes were calculated Post-Pre/SD pre. There were no significant differences between men and women's scores at pre or post ( $ps > .05$ ).  $N = 362$  for all measures except Rel. Satisfaction ( $N = 338$ ).

variables in the study (i.e., dedication, relationship satisfaction, communication quality, and social integration). For these models, each variable was entered as the dependent variable and the only predictor variable was gender (a level 1 predictor). The results demonstrated that there were no significant differences between men and women for any of the variables at pre- or post-assessment ( $ps > .05$ ). Next, we tested whether couples change in social integration and communication quality would vary based on receiving PREP in a group or couple format. We tested three models with changes in social integration, positive communication, and negative communication as the dependent variable, respectively. The predictor variables were PREP format (a level 2 predictor) and gender (at level 1). There were no significant differences in the amount of change men and women reported in their social integration or positive communication based on the format they received PREP ( $ps > .05$ ). However, couples who participated in PREP in the couple format reported larger reductions in their negative communication compared to couples who received PREP in the group format  $B = 0.57$ ,  $SE = .16$ ,  $p < .001$ . As such, we decided to control for format in our primary analysis.

### Primary Results

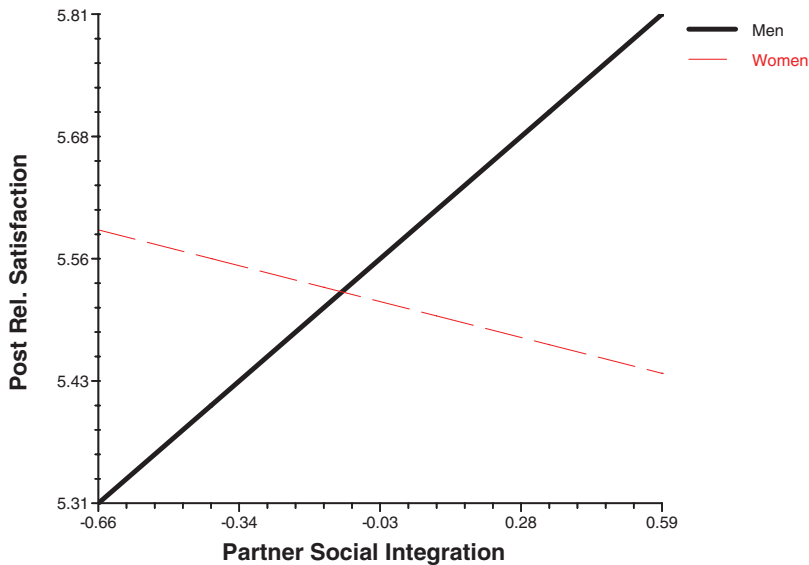
The results from the APIM are presented in Table 2. For parsimony, we only listed the interaction effects Gender  $\times$  Social Integration and Gender  $\times$  Negative Communication in the prediction of relationship satisfaction as these were the only two significant interaction effects. Specifically, the results demonstrated that individuals' increases in positive communication and social integration were positively related to their own ratings of dedication and relationship satisfaction. The partner effects revealed that as the individuals' partners reported increases in their social integration the individuals' dedication scores were higher. That is, as women reported increases in their social integration men reported higher levels of dedication (and vice versa). There was a significant partner effect for negative communication in the prediction

**TABLE 2** Summary of Fixed Effects from the Actor-Partner Models

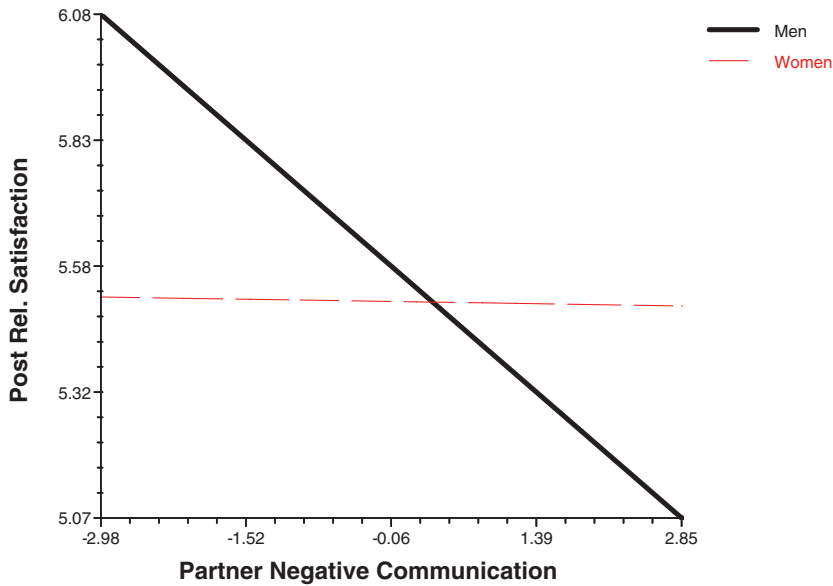
	Dedication	Rel. Satisfaction
Intercept ( $\gamma_{00}$ )	5.81*** (.05)	5.56*** (.05)
Format ( $\gamma_{01}$ )	-0.05 (.05)	-0.10 (.05)
Pre-Functioning ( $B_{01}$ )	0.45*** (.05)	0.36*** (.04)
Gender ( $B_{02}$ )	-0.03 (.03)	0.03 (.03)
Actor Effects		
$\Delta$ Positive Com. ( $B_{03}$ )	0.26*** (.04)	0.20*** (.04)
$\Delta$ Negative Com. ( $B_{04}$ )	-0.02 (.04)	-0.05 (.04)
$\Delta$ SocialInteg. ( $B_{05}$ )	0.37*** (.08)	0.40*** (.10)
Partner Effects		
$\Delta$ Positive Com. ( $B_{06}$ )	0.06 (.04)	0.03 (.04)
$\Delta$ Negative Com. ( $B_{07}$ )	-0.02 (.04)	-0.09** (.03)
$\Delta$ SocialInteg. ( $B_{08}$ )	0.22** (.08)	0.14 (.10)
$\Delta$ SocialInteg. $\times$ Gender ( $B_{09}$ ) <sup>1</sup>	...	0.26* (.12)
$\Delta$ Negative Com. $\times$ Gender ( $B_{10}$ ) <sup>1</sup>	...	-0.09* (.04)

Note. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ . Format was coded 1 = Couple, -1 = Group. Gender was coded 1 = Men, -1 = Women.  $\Delta$  = change in variable from pre to post assessment. 1 = These were the only two significant Gender  $\times$  Variable interaction effects in the two models.

of relationship satisfaction, but this was qualified by a significant interaction effect with gender (Figure 1). That is, as women reported decreases in negative communication men's relationship satisfaction was higher,  $B = -0.17$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $p < .001$ . However, men's decreases in negative communication



**FIGURE 1** Partner Change in Social Integration and Post Relationship Satisfaction. Note. The regression lines reflect the relationship between men's or women's relationship satisfaction given their partner's score on changes in social integration. Higher scores on changes in social integration indicate an increase in social integration from pre to post. (Color figure available online).



**FIGURE 2** Partner Change in Negative Communication and Post Relationship Satisfaction. *Note.* The regression lines reflect the relationship between men's or women's relationship satisfaction given their partner's score on changes in negative communication. Higher scores on changes in social integration indicate a reduction in negative communication from pre to post. (Color figure available online).

was not significantly related to women's relationship satisfaction,  $B = -0.003$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $p = .95$ . Also, as women reported increases in their social integration men reported higher relationship satisfaction,  $B = 0.40$ ,  $SE = 0.16$ ,  $p = .013$  (Figure 2). Again, men's report of increases in their social integration was not significantly related to women's relationship satisfaction,  $B = -0.11$ ,  $SE = .15$ ,  $p = .43$ . These two interaction effects suggest that for men their relationship satisfaction was related to their partner decreasing their perceptions of the negative communication in the relationship and increasing their social connections.

## DISCUSSION

The current study examined the association between changes in couple's communication and social integration and their dedication and relationship satisfaction in a community-based sample of African American adults who received 16 hours of PREP. Previous research has identified positive communication as a salient predictor and protective factor for relationship longevity and happiness (e.g., Markman et al., 2010b). Consistent with this research, the current study found couples' changes in positive communication to be

significantly related to increases in relationship satisfaction and dedication. CRE programs such as PREP commonly seek to increase positive communication through pro-relational interactions and discussions. Increases in positive ways of interacting and communicating lead to increases in positivity about and commitment to the future while allowing for greater safety and sacrifice in the relationship. Given our correlational design, we cannot assert that PREP's activities were directly associated with these positive changes. However, what is clear is that couples who attended PREP revealed large-sized effects in their positive communication and these changes were associated with positive changes in their sense of stability and happiness in the relationship.

This is one of the first known studies examining changes in couples' social integration on their relationship functioning. Couples who reported increases in their social integration also experienced greater dedication to one another. Dedication has been conceptualized as commitment to the future, an established identity as a couple, sacrifice, having a long-term vision for the relationship, and prioritizing the relationship (Owen et al., 2011). Conceptually, couples' sense of dedication may be enhanced as couples become more interactive with others in the community as these interactions might solidify their role as a unit and couples begin to think more in terms of "we," "us," and "our." As aforementioned, the current findings are consistent with collectivistic cultural values that are endemic to most African Americans, particularly the importance of kin/social support networks to the conceptualization of one's identity (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Hatchett & Jackson, 1992; McCabe et al., 1999; Murry et al., 2001). Societal pressure also contributes to couple identity as those who interact with the couple give support and positive feedback about their relationship—thus adding additional cohesion to the couple's identity. Moreover, new parent couples may experience increased social pressure by those who know the couple as they may express even stronger support for the sustainment of the relationship for the benefit of the child/children. Although these social pressures may be considered negative constraints at times (i.e., keeping couples together who are unhappy), this context demonstrates the positive elements of constraints in keeping couples together during particularly stressful times (Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2010).

The degree to which partners' changes in social integration and negative communication affected their partners' sense of happiness in the relationship varied by gender. Specifically, as women became more socially integrated and reported less negative communication, men reported increased relationship satisfaction. However, men's changes in social integration and negative communication were not significantly related to women's levels of relationship satisfaction. This suggests women's satisfaction with their partner is less connected to their partner's reported changes in communication quality and social integration. Explanations for these findings may lie within African American gender socialization histories and processes. Traditionally, there

has been greater emphasis on raising African American women to be independent and self-reliant while providing males with insulating support from racism and violence (Boyd-Franklin, 2003). This lends support for our finding that women's happiness is less dependent upon changes in partner/relationship satisfaction as African American women may have developed strong self-reliance schemas. This socialization process may also mean that as women engage with the community, insulating support increases for the relationship as well as for negative social pressures experienced by African American males. Although not predicted, couples within the couple format had larger changes in their negative communication as compared to couples in the group format. This may suggest that couples within the couple format may have benefitted from having more time with their partner and PREP leader to adjust and moderate their negative communication.

### Limitations

Implications and conclusions offered must be understood in concert with methodological limitations. First, although our sample size was large, the demographic makeup was fairly homogeneous (primarily low SES African American couples). Given the lack of empirical data on CRE programs with racial/ethnic minorities, this limitation is also a strength of the current study. Second, although couples were qualified as "new parents" due to the presence of a newborn addition to their family, it is unknown how many other children these couples had at the time and what possible impact this may have had on their relationship functioning (an error in the data collection process is responsible for this lack of data). Third, due to the naturalistic setting, no comparison group was evaluated and results can only be interpreted without this contrast. Similarly, changes in relationship functioning cannot be definitively connected to effects of the PREP program as many other factors may have influenced changes in couples (i.e., spending time together during the workshop, increased discussion of relationship issues, time apart from children, etc.). In addition, we examined self-reported changes (versus perceptions of partner change). Thus, the degree to which the partners agree that there is an increase in positive communication, for example, is unknown. These changes in relationship function were only measured during pre-post assessments, making it difficult to determine long-term gains. Also, we do not know whether participants' scores were influenced by social desirability or the positive effects felt after completing the program. Future research would be well advised to incorporate longitudinal assessments to examine the long-term influence of PREP on relationship changes.

### Implications

Despite these methodological limitations, a few salient implications can be drawn from the current findings. First, consistent with systems theory, the



couples' social network (e.g., friends, family member) who are invested in the couple's well-being may serve as a protective factor and may aid the couple in reaching their relationship goals. This may be especially true of couples who are expecting or who are new parents where the need for outside support during this particularly stressful time is essential as well as African American couples who ascribed to collectivistic values. Therapists and leaders of couple education programs may benefit from conceptualizing couples goals and issues within the framework of broader social networks (Szapocznik & Williams, 2000). For instance, leaders may want to ensure that couples in group relationship education settings are able to bond with one another as well as identify supportive social networks that can assist couples in maintaining long-term relational goals. To promote positive social networks, it may be useful to engage in social groups, such as churches and community centers, which promote activities that foster fellowship and social justice. Additionally, leaders may want to inquire how couples social networks perceive their relationship, which may place positive (or negative) influences on their relationship.

Second, while decreasing negative communication is a common focus for leaders and couples relationship education programs, there should also be attention to the promotion of positive communication. Clearly, the relationship between positive and negative communication are inherently intertwined. However, they are not merely bipolar opposites (Fincham, 2004). Indeed, increases in couples' positive communication appear to benefit men's and women's dedication and satisfaction. Gottman (1999) described a process of positive sentiment override, suggesting that positive elements of the relationship can override negative interactions. Thus, the ability for leaders to foster positive connections and interactions may be more powerful for couples' relationship functioning (Markman et al., 2010b). For instance, leaders may want to encourage structured communication to promote validation, monitor the emotional valence of conversations, and ensure respectful discourse (Markman et al., 2010a).

Overall, the current study poses interesting and clinically useful insight into facilitative and protective factors for romantic relationships. In particular, the importance of partner social involvement, especially during child-rearing years, is highlighted as a supportive and facilitative relationship component and is found to be predictive of increased relationship dedication and positive relationship functioning.

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