

# Examining the Outcomes of the *InsideOut Dad* Fatherhood Education Program for Incarcerated Minority Fathers

The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families  
1-11

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DOI: 10.1177/1066480720978541

journals.sagepub.com/home/tfj



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## Abstract

Using a mixed-methods approach, this study examined the outcomes and experiences of incarcerated minority fathers ( $N = 713$ ) who participated in *InsideOut Dad*, a widely used, corrections-based fatherhood education program. Quantitative analyses indicated decreases in partner conflict among participants and more positive perceptions of subjective well-being. Qualitative analyses revealed that the program was positively received, with participants noting the skills they developed. As a result of fatherhood education, incarcerated minority fathers reported being empowered and more confident in their roles as fathers and that they learned needed skills to be responsible and responsive fathers. Such findings may inform facilitators of corrections-based parenting programs on best practices for serving incarcerated fathers from historically underserved groups.

## Keywords

marginalized, minority, mixed-method evaluation, fatherhood education, phenomenology, father–child relations, partner conflict

The increase in incarcerated parents in the United States has coincided with the broader implementation of fatherhood education programs in correctional settings (Armstrong et al., 2018; Loper & Tuerk, 2006). Fatherhood education in correctional settings addresses the negative impact of incarceration on children and families while attempting to equip fathers with skills to avoid recidivism (Buston et al., 2012). Minority men are disproportionately represented in the correctional system (Sakala, 2014). An estimated 40% of incarcerated fathers are Black/African American, while approximately 20% are Latino (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010). These rates are particularly troubling considering the increased likelihood that children of incarcerated parents will drop out of school (Aaron & Dallaire, 2010), have emotional problems (Chung, 2011), and be more prone to engage in deviant activity (Purvis, 2013).

Scholars have noted an ongoing need for the evaluation of fatherhood education programs, particularly among nonmajority fathers (Holmes et al., 2020). Through mixed-methods analysis, the current study uses a family systems approach to examine the outcomes of *InsideOut Dad* (Brown et al., 2018), a corrections-based fatherhood education program. The current study examines the applicability of this program for minority fathers as well as the changes reported between program entry and exit in terms of father–child relationship quality, frequency of partner conflict, and key determinants of subjective well-being (i.e., self-reported psychological distress and perceived social support). The current study also qualitatively examines the experiences of participants, and the skills

fathers attributed to their participation. Exploring the perspectives of participating minority fathers may help to illustrate best practices for serving incarcerated minority fathers.

## Literature Review

### General Fatherhood Education

Fatherhood education has received steady federal funding for a decade (Tollestrup, 2018). Evaluations of community-based fatherhood education have found programs to be effective in increasing positive father involvement, improving father–child and spousal relations, and helping fathers enhance economic stability (Avellar et al., 2018; Concha et al., 2016; Dion et al., 2015; Fagan & Kaufman, 2015; Frank et al., 2015). Recent meta-analytic data (Holmes et al., 2020) show modest effect sizes of programs on father involvement ( $d = .114, p < .05$ ), parenting, ( $d = .110, p < .01$ ), and coparenting ( $d = .167, p < .05$ ).

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### Corrections-Based Fatherhood Education

Advocates of corrections-based fatherhood education view such interventions as an opportunity to lessen the impact of incarceration on families, help men enhance parenting skills, sustain parent–child bonds, and improve parental well-being (Armstrong et al., 2018). Incarceration may actually be seen as a window of opportunity for increasing responsible fatherhood (Goodey et al., 2019). Moreover, the majority of incarcerated parents will eventually be released and afforded the opportunity to resume active parental roles (Dyer, 2005).

Differences in the outcomes of corrections-based fatherhood education programs are attributed to variability in curricula implementation (Armstrong et al., 2018). Examples of this variability are found in the evaluative work of Barr et al. (2014) and Block et al. (2014). Despite some empirical focus on corrections-based fatherhood education in the last decade, few studies have captured the fatherhood education experiences of incarcerated minority fathers (Cabrera et al., 2015). Beyond the need to document the potential benefits of such education, evaluative research is needed to document the related experiences and subjective attitudes of fathers from marginalized groups. These efforts are consistent with some of the main objectives of the current federal responsible fatherhood initiative, which seeks to promote family stability among low-income and minority populations and greater father involvement in the face of certain obstacles, such as incarceration (Dion et al., 2015; Weaver, 2012).

### A Family Systems View of Incarceration and Family and Individual Well-Being

Family systems theorists have empirically documented reciprocal influence in family processes between parents and their children (Buehler & Welsh, 2009). For example, trauma attributed to parental incarceration has been linked to child behavioral problems (Lee et al., 2013), psychological distress (Morsy & Rothstein, 2016), and poor academic performance (Wildeman & Western, 2010). But reciprocal influence can also be positive. Opportunities for incarcerated fathers to interact with their children can decrease paternal distress and child alienation, subsequently strengthening father–child relations (Poehlmann et al., 2010; Roxburgh & Fitch, 2013; Visher, 2013). Research is needed to learn the extent to which fatherhood education can benefit incarcerated minority fathers.

**Partner relations.** The toll incarceration takes on romantic relationships is likewise systemic. For example, incarceration alters the relationship dynamics of romantic partners (Wildeman & Western, 2010) and increases the likelihood of marital dissolution (Huebner, 2005; Lopoo & Western, 2005). Such relationships may already be at a disadvantage due to other socioemotional development issues stemming from family backgrounds, which often translate into a lack of coping skills and less stable relationships in adulthood (Repetti et al., 2007).

Systemic “spillover” of psychological distress between partners is common when one partner is incarcerated (Wildeman & Western, 2010). Furthermore, if incarceration leads to single parenthood for nonincarcerated partners, resentment between partners may result (Fishman, 1990; Nurse, 2002). Single parenthood as the result of incarceration is relatively common in minority communities (Western & Wildeman, 2009); however, research is needed to gain a greater understanding of the link between incarceration and partner conflict.

**Subjective well-being.** Adult well-being has systemic influence on children (Buehler & Welsh, 2009) but needs more study in the context of fatherhood education. As a comprehensive measure of life satisfaction, subjective well-being encompasses objective and subjective determinants (Fleche et al., 2011). The current study focuses on determinants that fall into the latter category, with a focus on psychological distress and social support. Subjective well-being has garnered more emphasis on fatherhood education programs with the goal of strengthening participants’ personal development and orienting them toward positive future outlooks (Dion et al., 2015).

**Psychological distress and incarcerated parents.** Due to a greater likelihood of trauma, incarcerated individuals are at risk for poor mental health and social support (Maruschak et al., 2010; Roxburgh & Fitch, 2013). For example, depression and anxiety is more prevalent among incarcerated parents than incarcerated nonparents (Kjellstrand & Eddy, 2011; Wolff & Shi, 2012) and often stems from being separated from their children, concern for their welfare, and the lack of opportunity to assume a parental role (Shannon & Abrams, 2007). Research remains limited relative to fatherhood education’s role in reducing psychological distress among incarcerated minority fathers.

**Social support.** Social support includes informal networks of friends and family members and formal networks such as social service organizations (Cowan et al., 2010). The lack of social support, most notably through limited family interaction, has been found to be detrimental to incarcerated fathers, impacting the quality of parenting they are able to provide (Arditti & Few, 2006; Windzio, 2006). Conversely, access to positive social support during incarceration holds benefits for fathers, such as improved father–child relationships (Swanson et al., 2011), improved prison-life adjustment (Jiang & Winfree, 2006), reduced recidivism (Cochran, 2014), and more positive levels of psychological well-being (Listwan et al., 2010). Consistent social support is a resource that benefits individuals postrelease (Listwan et al., 2010; Pettus-Davis, 2014); however, more research is needed to examine the role of social support for minority men during incarceration (Pettus-Davis, 2014).

### Current Study

The current study has two major aims: (a) to evaluate the impact of a fatherhood education program (i.e., *InsideOut Dad*)

for incarcerated minority fathers in the areas of father–child relations, partner conflict, and perceptions of key determinants of subjective well-being (i.e., self-reported psychological distress and perceptions of social support) and (b) to learn, through qualitative analysis, about participant experiences and the skills they believed they developed as a result of their participation. Using a family systems theory framework, we took a mixed-methods approach to enrich our understanding of minority fathers' experiences (Venkatesh et al., 2013). With this mixed-methods approach, we explored whether the *InsideOut Dad* program (Brown et al., 2018) contributed to improved family relations and the subjective well-being of incarcerated minority fathers. In order to understand the processes of fatherhood education in correctional settings, the current study employed a phenomenological perspective to explore participant experience. To this end, we proposed the following research questions:

1. Do reports of father–child relations improve from pretest to posttest? (quantitative)
2. Do reports of partner conflict decrease from pretest to posttest? (quantitative)
3. Do perceptions of psychological distress improve from pretest to posttest? (quantitative)
4. Do perceptions of social support improve from pretest to posttest? (quantitative)
5. What were participants' experiences in the program? (qualitative)
6. What skills did participants believe they developed as a result of their participation? (qualitative)

## Method

### Data and Participants

Survey data were collected as part of a national evaluation of a federally funded fatherhood initiative. Survey items (described in detail in the Measures section) were determined by Mathematica Policy Research, a national firm contracted by the federal funding agency to design the survey instrument for fatherhood projects. Participants consisted of minority fathers ( $N = 713$ ) incarcerated in correctional facilities in a western state, who opted to participate in a federally funded fatherhood education program between July 2016 and August 2019. This program was designed to enhance father–child relationships through a specialized curriculum (i.e., *InsideOut Dad*; Brown et al., 2018) for incarcerated fathers by helping them connect with their families and prepare for successful societal reintegration. To fulfill program requirements, participants were required to attend five consecutive, 2-hr weekly sessions offered at the correctional facility.

Descriptive statistics (see Table 1) indicated that 41% of the sample was between the ages of 25 and 34. Two thirds of the sample were of Latino ethnicity. The largest non-Latino groups were American Indian/Alaska Native participants (9.4%) and Black/African American participants (8.8%), respectively. The

**Table 1.** Participant Characteristics.

	N	%
Age-group		
18–24	108	15.15
25–34	295	41.37
35–44	239	33.52
45+	71	9.96
Race/ethnicity		
Hispanic/Latino	479	67.18
American Indian/Alaska Native	67	9.40
Black/African American	63	8.84
Asian/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	41	5.75
Two or more races	34	4.77
Other	29	4.07
Education		
Less than high school	125	17.50
High school diploma/general equivalency diploma	399	56.00
Some college	108	15.10
Associate's/technical degree	67	9.40
Bachelor's degree or higher	14	2.00
Monthly income (prior to incarceration)		
\$1,000 or less	602	84.30
\$1,001–\$2,000	53	7.50
\$2,001–\$4,000	46	6.40
More than \$4,000	12	1.70
Employment status (prior to incarceration)		
Full-time employment	156	21.90
Part-time employment	16	2.30
Temporary employment	39	5.50
Unemployed	501	70.30
Relationship status		
Married or engaged	267	37.60
Separated or divorced	190	26.70
Widowed	12	1.70
Single-never married	243	34.10
Incarceration history		
First incarceration	183	25.70
Multiple incarcerations	530	74.30

Note.  $N = 713$ .

majority of the sample (56%) had completed high school, 84% reported a monthly income of \$1,000 or less prior to incarceration, 70% were unemployed prior to incarceration, 38% were married or engaged, and 74% had been incarcerated multiple times.

### Procedure and Research Design

The project was overseen by a team of faculty at a land grant University in the Western United States. Team members included faculty with diverse interests and backgrounds related to prevention science, community programming, clinical interventions, family life education, and extension. The faculty team secured federal funding for the hiring of full-time fatherhood education facilitators who taught family life education throughout the state. Facilitators were trained to teach the *InsideOut Dad* program and to administer the evaluation with fidelity.

Participants completed federally generated pre- and post-program surveys. Survey topics included parenting and coparenting practices, economic stability, relationships and marriage, and subjective well-being. Surveys were offered in English and Spanish. Collected data were entered into a secure management information system and extracted by coauthors who analyzed the data presented in the current study. Three of the four coauthors serve as faculty in a department of Human Development and Family Studies. The fourth author is a student research assistant. The faculty authors all have a track record of publishing mixed-methods research.

In order to gain a more comprehensive perspective on the experiences of participants, a mixed-methods design was employed (Venkatesh et al., 2013). Paired samples *t* tests gauged program impact on father-child relations, frequency of partner conflict, and perceptions of subjective well-being within the domains of psychological distress and social support by comparing scores, pretest to posttest. Per survey instructions and the Human Subjects protocol provided by the funding agency, participants who had not seen their children in the last month (74% of the sample) skipped items related to father-child relations. Similarly, if participants were not in romantic relationships (married or otherwise; 62% of the sample), they skipped items related to partner conflict. For both sets of items, listwise deletion methods were utilized to address issues related to missing data and to ensure that only participants with both pretest and posttest scores were included in the quantitative portion of the analysis. Quantitative analyses were supplemented by qualitative analyses of open-ended survey items that focused on participant experiences and skill development.

### Quantitative Measures

**Father-child relations.** A three-item subscale measured father-child relations. These items, adopted from the Protective Factors Survey (Counts et al., 2010), surveyed participants on how often, in the past month, they had experienced certain feelings toward their child, such as closeness. Items were rated on a Likert-type scale from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*often*). Subscales yielded an  $\alpha$  reliability coefficient of .88 pretest and .75 posttest.

**Partner conflict.** Changes in partner conflict were measured through a seven-item subscale, adopted from the Building Strong Families' Destructive Conflict subscale (Amato, 2014). Items explored how often events such as heated arguments had occurred between partners in the previous month. Items were rated on a Likert-type scale from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*often*). Subscales yielded an  $\alpha$  reliability coefficient of .92 pretest and .92 posttest.

**Psychological distress.** The Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (Kessler et al., 2002) measured changes in psychological distress from pretest to posttest. Items focused on the frequency with which participants experienced symptoms of depression or anxiety on a monthly basis rated on a Likert-type scale from 1 (*none of the time*) to 5 (*all of the time*). A total of six items

were combined to create a Psychological Distress subscale, yielding an  $\alpha$  reliability coefficient of .88 pretest and .87 posttest.

**Social support.** Changes in social support were measured through four survey items adopted from the Protective Factors Survey (Counts et al., 2010). Participants rated their level of agreement with statements related to whether they believed they had people they could talk to when lonely or people they could rely on during a crisis. Items were rated on a Likert-type scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). Items were combined to form perceptions of support index, which produced an  $\alpha$  reliability coefficient of .91 pretest and .93 posttest.

### Qualitative Measures and Analytical Procedures

During posttest data collection, which occurred during the final meeting, participants responded in writing to two open-ended survey items. The first item provided participants with an opportunity to discuss their general thoughts about their experiences in the *InsideOut Dad* program. The second item asked participants: What is the most important concept or result you gained from this course? We used this question to identify the skills participants believed they developed through their participation.

Qualitative data were primarily analyzed by two of the contributing authors using a phenomenological approach that often utilizes open-ended survey items to gain a greater understanding of participant experience (Creswell, 2013). Such an approach is characterized by social constructivism and is often applied when common meanings and experiences are of particular interest (Creswell, 2013). Throughout the analysis, these authors consulted with the other contributing authors who serve as senior faculty in their respective departments and have a record of publishing qualitative research.

A crucial element of qualitative analysis is interrater reliability (Gisev et al., 2013). To achieve interrater reliability, authors first analyzed all usable data separately to identify statements that provided a description of participant experience, a process referred to as horizontalization (Creswell, 2013). Because options to provide qualitative responses were given near the end of the posttest survey, nonresponses were omitted from the analysis and treated as a product of respondent fatigue (Porter et al., 2004).

After initial analyses, authors grouped statements and identified emerging themes within the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Authors consulted with one another to come to an agreement on major themes and subthemes. Occurrences of overlap between major themes and differences in perceptions of themes were discussed until agreement was reached. Data were then coded separately. Interrater reliability, a measure of the level of agreement between authors, was calculated by applying Cohen's  $\kappa$  statistic (Viera & Garrett, 2005). The two items under analysis served as the major themes. Authors' initial interrater reliability level was  $k = .97$  for the first theme

**Table 2.** Paired Samples *t* Tests for Outcome Measures Among *InsideOut Dad* Program Completers.

Indices	Pretest		Posttest		Mean Difference	Standard Error of Mean	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>					
Father-child relations	3.74	.56	3.78	.40	.04	.03	186	-1.32	.08
Partner conflict	2.04	.78	1.97	.76	-.07	.03	266	2.10*	.09
Psychological distress	2.25	.87	2.12	.84	-.13	.03	568	4.52**	.15
Social support	3.13	.69	3.22	.84	.09	.03	588	2.89***	.12

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

(participant experiences) and  $k = .92$  for the second theme (skill development), indicating strong levels of interrater reliability (Viera & Garrett, 2005). Remaining discrepancies were discussed until a consensus was reached.

## Quantitative Results

### Evaluating Program Impact

Paired samples *t* tests, intended to address Research Questions 1–4, were used to evaluate the impact of the *InsideOut Dad* program in addressing pretest to posttest changes (see Table 2). No significant changes occurred in father-child relations from pretest ( $M = 3.74$ ,  $SD = 0.56$ ) to posttest ( $M = 3.78$ ,  $SD = 0.40$ ),  $t = -1.32$ ,  $p = .190$ ,  $d = .08$ . Significant decreases were recorded for destructive partner conflict from pretest ( $M = 2.04$ ,  $SD = 0.78$ ) to posttest ( $M = 1.97$ ,  $SD = 0.76$ ),  $t = 2.10$ ,  $p = .037$ ,  $d = .09$ . Results also revealed decreases in psychological distress from pretest ( $M = 2.25$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ) to posttest ( $M = 2.12$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ ),  $t = 4.52$ ,  $p = .000$ ,  $d = .15$ . Finally, significant increases in perceived social support were identified from pretest ( $M = 3.13$ ,  $SD = 0.69$ ) to posttest ( $M = 3.22$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ ),  $t = -2.89$ ,  $p = .004$ ,  $d = .12$ .

## Qualitative Results

At posttest, participants had the opportunity to provide qualitative responses related to the *InsideOut Dad* program. Two major themes emerged from the written response data provided by participants: (a) participant experiences and (b) skill development. Subthemes also emerged from the two major themes. In general, themes were relatively consistent among participants, suggesting that qualitative analysis is effective in identifying the common experiences of incarcerated minority fathers enrolled in corrections-based fatherhood education programs. The following sections provide a detailed analysis of the qualitative data.

### Participant Experiences

A total of 493 participants provided usable responses related to their experiences. Three major subthemes emerged: (a) program effectiveness, (b) facilitator quality, and (c) feedback for improvement.

**Program effectiveness.** A total of 389 participants (79%) discussed the effectiveness of the *InsideOut Dad* program. Several adjectives were used to convey this effectiveness, including “excellent,” “informing,” “life changing,” and “inspirational.” One Black/African American participant’s enthusiasm was captured with the following statement: “This program is important because it shows men like us that there is something more special in this world than ourselves. A better coparent! A loving and caring father and husband! A better listener! A better person!”

In further describing the effectiveness of the program, participants described how the program inspired them to pursue self-improvement. For example, an Asian American participant stated: “This program has helped me overall form the foundation of how I’ve formed who I am as a father. I would not be half the father I’ve come to be without this program.” A Native American participant encapsulated the effectiveness of the *InsideOut Dad* program in helping fathers improve familial relations with the following statement:

After attending this program, I have regained the confidence I needed to be a good father to my 2-year-old son. I have learned the importance in having integrity and self-worth when fathering my son. I have also learned even further, the importance in love and honesty. I am truly confident in my new knowledge and new skills that I have learned and I am very excited to build a healthy relationship with my son and rebuilding the relationship with his mother.

**Facilitator quality.** A total of 79 participants (16%) discussed how program facilitators enriched their learning experience by explaining information thoroughly, showing genuine concern for participants, and providing encouragement. Several participants remarked on the value of class discussions, with one Latino American participant stating: “I enjoyed the way it was taught to us and how comfortable the facilitator made me feel when I shared my thoughts and experiences.” A response offered by a Black/African American participant captured the overall sentiment of facilitator quality: “The program is good. The charisma, energy, effort, sincerity, and delivery of the teacher is great.”

**Feedback for improvement.** While most participants offered positive feedback, 25 participants (5%) suggested ways the

program could be improved. Suggestions included expanding the program, smaller class sizes, longer sessions, and updated curriculum. Multiple participants argued that the program could be improved by including further information related to relationships and finances.

Consistent with past evaluations of the *InsideOut Dad* program (see Block et al., 2014), several participants argued the program would have a greater impact if it allowed for interaction with their children. For example, a Latino American participant stated: "Good program but if not in connection with your kids then it's difficult to understand some of the assignments." Another Latino American participant added: "The program could benefit by setting up a special visitation setting where inmates can apply some of the things that are taught."

### Skill Development

A total of 112 participants offered responses regarding the skills they developed as a result of their participation. Three major subthemes emerged: (a) responsible fatherhood, (b) empowerment, and (c) communication.

**Responsible fatherhood.** Of these responses, 45 participants (40%) noted elements of responsibility in their statements, such as spending more time with their children and being supportive. Time was regarded as an essential component in exhibiting responsible fatherhood. For example, one Latino American participant stated:

The most important thing I learned is that the best way to show my child how much I care and how much I love them is to spend time with them. Money is a material thing, but time is emotional support.

Several participants spoke about the knowledge they gained through their participation regarding the significance of responsible fatherhood, inspiring them to want to take the steps to form better father-child connections. Many participants expressed a firm resolve to fulfill their responsibilities, which was reflected in the following response by a Latino American participant: "I learned to listen and explain and stop using excuses as a tool not to be a parent that my children are the future and we all need to be positive role models."

**Empowerment.** Thirty-seven (33%) participants indicated they felt more capable of being good fathers as a result of their participation. The knowledge and skills they acquired seemed to empower them and influence them to exhibit an optimistic outlook. As one Latino American participant said: "This course helped me gain better tools that I needed to be the best dad I can be." An Asian American participant reinforced this sentiment by stating: "What I gained in this program is truly vital to my future as a dad, father, friend, and husband. I CAN now be an effective father using the tools and techniques taught in this *InsideOut Dad* program."

Several participants recognized opportunities for connecting with their children, despite their incarceration. For example, a Latino American participant stated: "I learned that I can be an effective and successful parent even in my current state of incarceration. Also, that it's never too late to gain better parenting skills." Another Latino American participant had a refreshing outlook for the future:

The most important thing I learned was realizing I have a second chance at being a dad. That mistakes come with parenting and the important thing is to never give up on myself as a dad because my children won't give up on me as their dad unless I do.

**Communication.** Another skill participants believed they developed through this program was effective communication, as 30 (27%) participants commented on how their communication skills had improved. This included listening and being more emotionally expressive. Several participants noted that communication with the mother of their children was as important as communication with their children. For example, one Latino American participant stated: "Being a father is more than just being a good listener to your kids but being respectful and listening to their mother's views." Lastly, several comments reflected an improvement in relationships through improved communication skills. The following comment offered by a Latino American participant demonstrated this sentiment:

I learned how to communicate with my children and how to be a father in their lives without actually being there. I would like to say thank you for the class and the facilitator for helping me reconnect with my children. If I could take this class over again I would.

### Discussion

As the male prison population increases, so too does the number of incarcerated fathers (Armstrong et al., 2018). Such a phenomenon is especially common for minority communities due to the disproportionate representation of minority fathers in the correctional system (Sakala, 2014). Fatherhood education seeks to help incarcerated fathers improve involvement and parent-child relations. The current study applied a mixed-methods analysis to (a) evaluate the impact of the *InsideOut Dad* program in addressing father-child relations, partner conflict, and selected determinants of subjective well-being among incarcerated minority fathers and (b) conduct an analysis of qualitative data to learn about participant experiences and the skills they believed they developed through their participation. Major findings are presented below.

### Evaluation of Findings

**Programmatic impact.** The current study's quantitative analysis (Research Questions 1-4) showed statistically significant improvements from pretest to posttest for three of the four

measures under examination, the exception being father–child relations. The quantitative analyses produced small effect sizes, ranging from  $d = .09$  (decreased partner conflict) to  $d = .15$  (decreased psychological distress). These results suggest that *InsideOut Dad* can help incarcerated minority fathers improve their relationships with romantic partners and their perceptions of subjective well-being within the domains of psychological distress and social support. From a family systems perspective, these positive outcomes may spill over to other positive processes (Roxburgh & Fitch, 2013; Visser, 2013) and may eventually lead to positive impacts on father–child relations. Such improvements made while incarcerated may contribute to positive future outlooks for participants, as improvements in these areas have been found to help ease the process of societal reintegration for parents with incarceration histories (Cochran, 2014; Listwan et al., 2010).

The lack of significance found for the measure of father–child relations brings to light a major challenge for incarcerated fathers: the opportunity to have contact with their children during their incarceration (Butler et al., 2019). Analysis of survey data indicates that three fourths of participants had not seen their children in the last month, making it difficult to gauge the impact of the *InsideOut Dad* program in terms of improving father–child relations. The rate of noncontact in this sample was actually higher than past research that found that approximately two thirds of fathers had no contact with their child during incarceration (Day et al., 2005). This may be due to the restrictive protocols of correctional institutions regarding visitation policies (Barr et al., 2014; Murray et al., 2012). It may also reflect the nature of the relationship between the incarcerated father and the child’s mother or caregiver who can play a “gatekeeping” role in determining the frequency with which children visit an incarcerated parent (Loper & Tuerk, 2006).

**Qualitative findings.** The current study’s qualitative analysis (Research Questions 5 and 6) focused on two major themes: (a) participant experiences and (b) skill development. Fathers’ qualitative comments focusing on program effectiveness and skill development highlight a synergy between quantitative and qualitative findings. The fathers’ comments illustrated processes through which quantitative gains may have been achieved (e.g., less partner conflict, more positive perceptions of subjective well-being).

**Participant experiences.** A strong majority of fathers noted what they perceived as the effectiveness of the program, especially in terms of helping them improve their relationships with their children and partners. These fathers felt the program equipped them with skills needed to be a better parent, while also setting them on a course for self-improvement.

Fathers also offered praise for program facilitators, which may have influenced participants to approach the program with an open mind, thus increasing their receptiveness to the content and their subsequent improvements in program target areas (i.e., partner relations and subjective well-being). Consistently,

past research has pointed to the role program facilitators play in producing positive program outcomes (Higginbotham & Myler, 2010; Ketting et al., 2017).

Fathers also provided feedback on ways they believed the program might be improved. Most recommended participants be afforded more opportunities to interact with their children so they could apply what they had learned. This recommendation is consistent with the research of Block et al. (2014), which also evaluated the *InsideOut Dad* program, but for a more general audience. Such findings point to an opportunity for program improvement that involves more family participation. However, this may prove difficult due to the restrictions correctional facilities impose related to visitation (Murray et al., 2012).

**Skill development.** In terms of skill development, participants emphasized responsible fatherhood, empowerment, and communication skills. In discussing the benefits of developing these skills, fathers noted that learning to be more responsible, feeling more empowered, and improving communication skills helped inspire them to strengthen their familial relationships.

This is a promising finding for practitioners hoping to demonstrate the effectiveness of corrections-based fatherhood education and the ability of such programs to reach some of their main objectives, which center on improving both parent–child and couple relationships (Frank et al., 2015). Feeling a greater sense of empowerment may also speak to the improved perceptions of subjective well-being that participants displayed. This is another positive outcome, as positive perceptions of mental health and social support have been found to benefit incarcerated fathers in the areas of societal reintegration and reduced recidivism (Galardi et al., 2017; Pettus-Davis, 2014).

### *Limitations and Future Directions*

Limitations of the current study may help inform future directions for research and best practices for program implementation. One major limitation dealt with access to incarcerated populations. For example, participants were allowed limited time away from their cellblock and that time was almost exclusively used for curriculum instruction. Such a limitation, coupled with the already restrictive nature of correctional settings, makes data collection and program completion a challenge. As a result, smaller proportions of participants (31% for responses related to participant experiences and 16% for responses related to skill development) contributed usable qualitative data. Such a situation illustrates the need for follow-up efforts to understand the long-term benefits participants derive from the program.

Another limitation, which also points to the restrictive nature of correctional settings, as well as the design of the *InsideOut Dad* curriculum, was the absence of father–child contact during the program. This lack of contact with children is a common critique of this program. Consistent with past evaluative studies, participants expressed a desire for the program to integrate more family involvement so they could apply

their newly developed skills (Block et al., 2014). Such modifications may be difficult given the obstacles to visitation posed by correctional institutions, which are an impediment to familial interaction during periods of incarceration (Hairston, 1998). Such a situation becomes exacerbated given the health concerns surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, which may further tighten visitation policies in correctional institutions.

Although the current study focused on minority participants, our sample was primarily of Latino ethnicity (67%). This is an artifact of the state in which this research was conducted, where Latinos represent the dominant minority group. The fact that this study was conducted in correctional facilities in only one state is also a limitation. Future research is needed among racially and ethnically diverse incarcerated fathers from other states to improve generalizability. Finally, the current study did not utilize a control group, making it difficult to fully gauge program effectiveness.

### Practical Implications

Nearly one quarter of the world's incarcerated population resides in the United States (Walmsley, 2013) and the consistent increase in the nation's incarcerated population continues to produce more incarcerated parents. Such a phenomenon, along with the fact that many incarcerated parents will eventually be released and afforded the opportunity to serve a parental role, has influenced advocates of prisoner rehabilitation to urge correctional institutions to incorporate parenting education into their rehabilitation programs, with the goal of lessening the impact of incarceration on families (Armstrong et al., 2018; Hobler, 2001; LaRosa & Rank, 2001).

Of all groups impacted by paternal incarceration, minority communities and families are impacted most severely due to the disproportionate representation of minority men in correctional settings (Bonczar, 2003). The deleterious impacts of the mass incarceration of minority men on minority communities and families have been well-documented (Vogel & Porter, 2016). Perhaps the most concerning consequence of these trends is the potential for generational cycles of incarceration, as children of incarcerated parents have a heightened risk of incarceration (Purvis, 2013).

The most prominent implication of this study is for family life educators: The results suggest that incarcerated minority fathers may benefit from fatherhood education programs designed to equip fathers with stronger communication skills, a greater sense of empowerment, and a better understanding of responsible fatherhood. The maintenance of such skills could assist participants in enjoying a smoother adjustment to life after incarceration and reduced probability of recidivism. Future research is needed to measure such longitudinal outcomes. Further research is also needed to examine the extent to which more dosage (i.e., more hours of education) might result in larger effect sizes, and what role demographics may play.

In terms of therapeutic implications, the results suggest that fatherhood education programs helped incarcerated minority

fathers improve relationships with intimate partners and their perceptions of key determinants of subjective well-being, specifically psychological distress and social support. Such findings may point to positive future outlooks for participants, as improvements in these areas have been shown to contribute to more successful societal reintegration for parents with incarceration histories (Cochran, 2014; Listwan et al., 2010). Additional longitudinal research will help clinicians know the extent to which benefits from such a program may have a positive, reciprocal impact on the family system.

Overall, the examination of participant experiences revealed that many participants noted the effectiveness of the *InsideOut Dad* program while discussing the new skills they developed. Findings from the current study may inform educators designing similar programs on best practices and the skills incarcerated minority fathers value most. Additionally, learning more about participant experiences may provide ideas to strengthen current programs. Educating fathers from historically marginalized groups on the importance of responsible fatherhood may also help address and possibly contribute to the prevention of generational incarceration that disproportionately impacts minority families.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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