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Culturally Relevant Programming in Action: A Case Study of a Marriage Education Program for African American Couples

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Keywords: Adult Education, African American marriages, culturally relevant, program planning

Abstract: The purpose of this study was to understand how a preventive intervention, specifically a marriage education program, was designed to meet the needs of African American couples.

Marriage education programs provide skills-based support for couples, and are considered by participants to be a more desirable alternative to therapy. Many preventive interventions, such as marriage education programs, use cognitive-behavioral strategies to educate couples. The programs are designed to equip each spouse with the skills and tools they need to handle the problems they will encounter, and to stop negative interactions. One way this is done is by teaching couples how to handle negative emotions and conflict (Berger & Hannah, 1999; Halford, 2004; Halford, Markman, Kline, & Stanley, 2003). Marriage education programs are developed, in part, based on research conducted with couples (Adler-Baeder, Higginbotham, Lamke, 2004; Berger & Hannah, 1999). This research is important to highlight key aspects of marital life, provide researchers and professionals a clearer understanding of the issues or problems couples face, and it shapes the interventions that professionals select and design (Halford, Markman, Kline, & Stanley, 2003).

According to Bernal (2006), intervention research lags behind in developing, adapting, and testing approaches with diverse populations. This leads to a key problem affecting marriage education programs. The research samples are often homogenous in their composition, i.e., the samples are often comprised of White, middle-class couples (Halford et al., 2003; Markman et al., 2006). These research results are often the information that provides the basis for textbooks that will be used to teach students, as well as to train and educate professionals (such as therapists/counselors). If the research samples are homogenous, then the resulting intervention does not address the needs of a diverse group of participants, i.e., it is not culturally relevant. According to Bernal and Saez-Santiago (2006), a challenge for professionals is the “articulation and documentation” of the influence of culture and ethnicity in psychosocial interventions. One of the tenets of sociocultural theory is that all learners are shaped by their cultural identities, so learning cannot be considered context-free. An understanding of the influence of culture is critical to addressing how interventions may be adapted, or tailored to meet the needs of diverse families.

Review of the Literature

There is an inadequate body of literature which expounds on the process of designing a culturally relevant marriage education program. This qualitative study, which examined an African American Marriage Program, is a step in filling this gap in the research. The study is also significant because of what the results may mean for educators, counselors, researchers, and other professionals who work with families. Whaley (2000) notes that one way to address the need for greater cultural sensitivity in interventions, is to identify cultural themes or issues that impact the health and behavior of participants. It is important for interventions to be designed in a way that addresses the contextual factors that influence the lives of the participants.

Interventions that are culturally sensitive are more readily understood and accepted by participants. The inclusion of cultural norms and values into all aspects of the program or educational setting can lead to greater participant satisfaction and more positive outcomes (Ancis, 2004).

Sheared (1999) has examined the educational experiences of African American adult learners. She discusses the concept of polyrhythmic realities to address the influence of culture in educational settings. Polyrhythmic realities refer to the “lived experience” of an individual within a context that has been formed by sociocultural, political, and historical influences. These experiences subsequently impact the manner in which one perceives self, as well as others. In an inclusive classroom environment, the positionality of the instructor and the participants are incorporated into curriculum as well as delivery. Positionality refers to the way that factors such as race, class, and gender influence an individual’s worldview. Sheared’s assertion is that creating an inclusive environment in educational programs will positively impact both the recruitment and retention of African American adult learners.

Additionally, Sheared (1999) suggests several factors that help promote retention of Black students in ABE programs. One factor is the importance of connecting learning to lived experiences, which must be reflected in key dimensions of the program. According to Sheared (1999), it is important for participants not only to be connected with the instructor and the other participants, but also the program goals. Relevance is another factor that can promote the recruitment and retention of African American adult learners. This means that in the design and delivery of the program, it is important to help students see that what they are learning will positively impact areas of concern.

Sealy-Ruiz (2007) conducted a study examining the impact of a culturally relevant curriculum on the educational experiences of African American female adult learners. The author states that culturally relevant curriculum draws on the backgrounds and life experiences of the learners, as a way to challenge the dominant (White, male) perspective in Adult Education. Sealy-Ruiz (2007) also notes the importance of culturally relevant curriculum so that students of color do not feel stereotyped and excluded in the classroom and the curriculum. She incorporated the cultural identity of her students in the class by including literature by African American authors and authors of different ethnic backgrounds, as well as requiring the women to write essays based in their life experiences and their responses to the literature. Culturally relevant curriculum also requires the instructor to provide a safe classroom environment, which helps to facilitate discussion. The implementation of a culturally relevant curriculum resulted in the fostering of a positive self and group identity for the participants. It also encouraged self-affirmation and affirmation of participant goals (Sealy-Ruiz, 2007).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand how a preventive intervention, specifically a marriage education program, was designed to meet the needs of African American couples. The research questions were: 1) What are the common components of a culturally relevant program designed for African American couples? 2) What program delivery methods were most effective given the topic and the participant group?

The case that was examined in this study was an intervention program, specifically the African American Marriage Program, which was developed at a Southern University. The purpose of this program was to promote stronger marriages among African American couples, through skills-based marriage education. The curriculum used in this program was the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP), an empirically supported treatment.

The intervention curriculum was tailored to address the cultural experiences of African American couples, i.e., it was made culturally relevant. This will be addressed in greater detail in the following sections.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted with Program staff members. Additionally, data collection included observation of the video modules used throughout the curriculum as well as observation one of the videotaped program sessions. Document analysis of promotional materials and program literature was also used for data collection.

Results

There were four main themes that reflect the key dimensions of a marriage education program designed for African American couples. These features shaped the design of the program and impacted the way that the intervention was implemented in the community. These emergent themes are: mirroring the cultural/lived experiences of African Americans; honoring African and African American based patterns and traditions; the intergenerational transmission of knowledge; and the importance of experiential knowledge. There were two major conclusions from this study: 1) Culturally relevant programs designed for African Americans should include and or reflect their African American cultural values and lived experiences; 2) The program delivery methods that were effective for the participants in the African American Marriage Program were techniques that were collaborative and under girded with an understanding of the endemic nature and impact of race and racism. The chart below details the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data.

Themes with Associated Categories and Subcategories

Themes	Sub-themes
I. Mirroring the Cultural/Lived Experiences of African Americans	A. Importance of Spirituality and Prayer B. The Impact of Racism and Racial Discrimination on Marital Relationships C. Dealing with Issues of Cultural Mistrust
II. Honoring African and African American Based Patterns and Traditions	A. Types of Communication B. Village Atmosphere; Community C. Wisdom of the Elders
III. Intergenerational Transmission of Knowledge	
IV. The Importance of Experiential Knowledge	

Discussion

In any preventive intervention, the overarching goal is to encourage the positive aspects of family functioning (or human behavior) by impeding risk factors and promoting protective factors (Albee & Gullotta, 1997; Coie, Miller-Johnson, & Bagwell, 2000). My examination of this marriage education program revealed the inclusion of a key protective factor present in the curriculum. One of the goals of this African American Marriage Program is to strengthen the relationships of Black couples while helping them obtain the goals they have set for themselves.

The importance of religion in the African American community is a protective factor. A protective factor serves a buffering effect by enhancing one's resistance to stressors (Albee & Gullotta, 1997; Coie et al., 2000; Ellison, 1997; Hines & Boyd-Franklin, 1996). For many people, prayer is a natural response to a stressful or distressing situation. Prayer can also be a stress-relieving activity for couples. For instance, couples can ask God for help to get back on track with their good intentions for their mate, and to help them work together to use their skills. The use of prayer is interconnected with the other skills taught in this intervention. Though the Program materials are strongly Christian in their orientation, they can be used with other religious orientations, specifically those who believe in the use of prayer as an active component of their faith.

The creation of the module addressing the impact of racism is an example of how a preventive intervention is designed to hinder the impact of certain risk factors. Racism can have detrimental effects on a person's physical and mental health; it can also be damaging to the well-being of the marital/family relationship (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Feagin & McKinney, 2003; Franklin & Boyd-Franklin, 2000). The intervention curriculum was designed to acknowledge the stressor of racism. Couples learned about the negative effects it can have on their relationship, and most importantly, they received specific strategies, such as the importance of using active listening techniques when talking about these encounters. The use of positive communication skills is one way of safeguarding against the harmful effects of racism on marital relationships, by removing the urge to blame or be judgmental; this can lead to misplaced anger and an argument between the couple.

It was concluded that the program delivery methods that were effective for the participants in the African American Marriage Program were techniques that were collaborative and supported with an understanding of the endemic nature and extensive impact of race and racism. The results of this study support the position maintained in the literature that learning is not value-free but is always situated within culture. Therefore, it is important for practitioners and researchers to understand their participant's cultural lens (Triandis, 1989; 1996; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995). The historical, environmental, and social forces that shape participants' lives must be integrated throughout the process from design of the intervention through the delivery and evaluation phases (Castro, Barrera, & Martinez, 2004; Dumas, Rollock, Prinz, Hops, & Blechman, 1999).

The Program staff incorporated the use of two strategies that proved effective in the delivery of this community-based intervention. These strategies, which made a positive impact in the areas of recruitment and retention, were the use of focus groups and the development and maintenance of community partnerships. The use of focus groups provided an opportunity for networking within the community. One of the focus groups was held with a group of 12 African American males, who were either married or engaged with a firm date to marry. The men were asked about the program format; these participants discussed how to make the program appealing to African American males. Specifically, these men felt it would be beneficial for the male participants to have a space to talk about their issues as husbands and fathers; an opportunity to support/encourage one another.

The focus group for community leaders provided an opportunity to introduce this group to the intervention, and to address any questions or concerns they may have about the program. These focus groups with community leaders and stakeholders led to the development of partnerships. These partnerships allowed community members an opportunity to assist in various aspects of program design, planning, and delivery. This networking was also an important part of

recruitment and retention of program participants and contributed to the successful implementation of the Program.

The involvement of pastors was also an important step towards establishing credibility and trust within the community. As previously noted, a barrier to participation in community-based interventions or research-based programs is mistrust of researchers and mental health services. In light of the importance of the church in the Black community, pastors have credibility and are well-respected; they also serve as gatekeepers in the African American community and they can identify community leaders. Pastors were given the opportunity to preview the program and ask questions or voice concerns; the endorsement on the pastors was an important step in obtaining credibility and gaining much needed community access.

Another feature of the Program that was important to effectively delivering the program was the sense of cohesion between Program staff and participants, which points to the presence of a village atmosphere. Once participants were enrolled in the program, the Program staff worked to make sure that participants felt welcome and knew that they were important, as was the health and maintenance of their marriages. One of the staff members framed this sentiment this way, “. . . we really thought about what is it that we’ll need to ensure that once these families get here, we make them feel like our family.” This village atmosphere reflects the importance of strong kinship bonds in the African American community. This collectivistic philosophy places emphasis on group well-being. This connection extends beyond blood relatives and also espouses the belief that we are responsible for one another (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Hill, 1998; 1999; and Hines & Boyd-Franklin, 1996).

Conclusion

If a preventive intervention is adapted to suit a particular cultural group it can be successful and effective in changing negative patterns. Marriage education programs are skills-based preventive interventions designed to enhance the qualities that lead to greater marital satisfaction: a healthy communication system, creative conflict resolution, and a greater sense of intimacy within the marital relationship (Berger & Hannah, 1999; Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Mace, 1983; Silliman, Stanley, Coffin, Markman, & Jordan, 2001). These are just some of the salient features of a marriage enrichment program, and they were present in the curriculum of this Program. While these interventions are successful across groups, access to these programs is not always the same. This African American Marriage Program was an opportunity to bring these resources to the Black community, but more importantly, ensuring that the resulting intervention was reflective of the values and experiences of the participants.

This marriage education program examined in this study matched the learners’ educational experience with their cultural backgrounds. Educational programs that are a good fit between participants and their social environments result in more successful programs (Ladson-Billings, 1992; 1995; Sealy-Ruiz, 2007; Sheared, 1999). This marriage enrichment program stated their goal was to help African American couples keep their relationships strong and to reach the goals they have set for themselves. The skills taught in the intervention were built around cultural values (such as spirituality) and common experiences (such as racism). The relevance of the program goals and curriculum to the lived experiences of the participants was beneficial to the recruitment and retention of these adult learners (Sheared, 1999). Culturally relevant programs, as described by Guy (1999), use knowledge to fight oppression by empowering learners/participants to become change agents in their families, communities, and the world around them.

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