

Working with low-resource and culturally diverse audiences

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Abstract

A growing challenge for family educators is effectively providing family education for low-resource and culturally diverse audiences. These audiences have not been served well in the past, and family educators need to find more appropriate ways of providing programming for these populations. This paper provides family educators with strategies for learning about and partnering with low-resource and culturally diverse audiences. Ways to provide relationship and marriage education with these audiences are also provided.

Key Words: marriage, marriage education, low-resource, diversity, Latino

Introduction

As the United States becomes increasingly diverse, educators are being asked to develop and implement programming that will benefit these ever new and growing populations. This paper will provide knowledge and resources to address that need. The objectives of this paper are (1) to provide educators with information on learning about and partnering with low-resource and culturally diverse audiences, and (2) to provide ideas about how relationship and marriage education might be different for low-resource and culturally diverse audiences.

Extension educators with the Cooperative State Research, Education Extension Service (CSREES) have directives concerning serving individuals and families in the nation, states, and territories. There are several documents that provide edicts about serving *all* people in our communities proportionately, including low-resource and culturally diverse populations (U. S. Department of Agriculture 1992). In addition, Extension educators need to develop partnerships with members of low-resource and culturally diverse audiences when developing and implementing programming (National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges 2002). Finally, educators need to draw on what Extension has done historically, which is to spend time with prospective audiences to develop partnerships to learn what people value (Schauber and Castania 2001). Many Extension educators work in communities that are more culturally diverse and more complex than they were in the early days of Extension, but the principle is the same. These directives serve as backdrop for the work we are describing.

Low-resource audiences

Relationship and marriage education can be of tremendous benefit to low-resource audiences. At the same time, there are multiple barriers to making marriages work because of the stresses that these audiences face. In addition, Extension educators historically have had limited success in getting low-resource couples to participate in relationship education. The term “low-resource” rather than “low-income” will be used to describe this population in this paper. However, many individuals and families who are poor or have low incomes are very resourceful. Many are not limited-resource in the sense that they have rich networks of support and are very good at meeting their basic needs with little money.

Case study: Diane and Kevin. This paper begins by considering the case of Diane and Kevin who recently had a baby girl. Diane and the baby live with her mother in a trailer, and she is finishing up high school this year. Kevin also lives with his parents. Neither of their families has much money, but they give a great deal of emotional support to their children. Kevin really wants to marry Diane. He says that he loves her and the baby, and he wants to live with them full-time. Kevin works part-time at a gas station. He did not finish high school; he found the reading and math very difficult. Kevin does not have enough money to rent a place for him and

Diane to live together. Kevin's parents have invited Diane and the baby to live with them in their house until they have enough money to get a place of their own. However, Diane is unsure of this arrangement. She views Kevin's parents as "pushy" and "opinionated." Diane is happy living with her mother, but is frustrated because she would like to live with Kevin, too.

Diane and Kevin probably sound like people that Extension serves with nutrition education, parenting, and other family programs. They have a desire to get married or live together as a family, but they do not have the financial resources to do so. Their lack of money relates to working in low-wage jobs and not having finished high school. How might a couple like Diane and Kevin be helped through relationship and marriage education?

Efforts were made to address this question, and the *Caring for my Family* curriculum resulted (Shirer 2003). This curriculum was designed to help unmarried, new parents make healthy decisions about their relationships, and give them the skills to work together to raise their children. Most marriage education curricula available at the time were developed for middle-class, European American populations who did not face the issues that Diane and Kevin faced.

The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study. The *Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study* (McLanahan et al. 2003) provides an excellent research base for thinking about low-resource relationship and marriage education. The research team for the fragile families study has defined a *fragile family* as an unmarried, low-income couple with a new baby. At the time of the baby's birth, the couple is living together or romantically involved with each other. This definition is important because the researchers showed that for the majority of these families, the couples were no longer together by the time the baby reached two years of age. Something happened over time that prevented these families from forming.

Data from the 1997 National Survey of American Families (Urban Institute 2005) showed that as children get older, father involvement declined sharply. By the end of their first year, almost 30 percent of these children live with their mother only, 27 percent live in a fragile family, and 38 percent live with two biological married parents. By the time the children reached their teens, 59 percent lived with their mother only, 5 percent in a fragile family, and 19 percent with two biological married parents. To put it simply, two factors were contributing to this increase in single parent families: (1) fragile families were not forming; and (2) married families were dissolving, hence, the use of the term "fragile," which is meant to denote potential but also a great vulnerability in these poor families (Fragile Families Study 2003; McLanahan et al. 2003).

Based on these early patterns, the *Fragile Family and Child Wellbeing Study* was implemented (McLanahan et al. 2003) primarily to learn more about these couples. The study was intended to inform policies and programs to help these families realize their family formation goals.

Researchers are following a cohort of nearly 5,000 children born in the United States between 1998 and 2000. The study has also oversampled for births to unmarried couples. Early and

subsequent findings from this study have created a great deal of interest in offering relationship and marriage education to low-income, unmarried parents (Carlson and McLanahan 2005; Seefeldt and Smock 2004). Importantly, the findings show that 82 percent of fathers are highly engaged with their children and partner at the child's birth —82 percent. Both fathers and mothers reported high hopes for their relationship and their future as a family at this time. The researchers have called this a “magic moment” and a “reachable moment” when unmarried couples are committed to each other and optimistic about the future.

As a result, intervening with unmarried parents at or near the time of a child's birth may offer the best chance for success (McLanahan et al. 2003). If new parents can learn the skills and attitudes for a healthy couple relationship, they might be able to better manage conflict and avoid other difficulties that lead to relationship dissolution. However, these interventions need to go beyond offering skill-building for a healthy couple relationship.

Barriers to marriage. Diane and Kevin, whose relationship was described above, faced several barriers to marrying and living together as a family. The case study showed that Diane still needed to complete high school and Kevin had low-wage, part time work. The fragile families study (Fragile Families Study 2003; Haskins, McLanahan and Donohue 2005) has also revealed that couples like Diane and Kevin face many additional barriers to attaining and sustaining a stable marriage including

- Mothers and fathers both have low human capital. They lack the education and training to obtain jobs that pay a livable wage.
- The employment they are able to obtain is unstable and pays low wages.
- They have health problems or substance abuse problems that interfere with their ability to work and maintain healthy family life.
- A parent may have children by several different partners, none of whom are spouses, leading to step family issues.
- Parents report relationship problems related to infidelity and high levels of conflict and violence.

These barriers show that most of these couples need more than relationship education to create a stable marriage and family. Theodora Ooms and Pamela Wilson (2004) conservatively estimated that about one-third of all fragile families would benefit from relationship and marriage education alone. For the remaining two-thirds, a Marriage Plus Approach is needed (Ooms and Wilson 2004). In addition to relationship education, participants would be involved in a

comprehensive program that continues their education, provides employment assistance, addresses mental and physical health problems, and deals with challenges of having children with other partners.

What has been learned about working with fragile families?

In the last few years, marriage and relationship education programs have begun to be developed and tested for fragile families. Although few of these intervention studies have been published in peer-reviewed journals, promising practices are beginning to emerge to guide this work (Ooms and Wilson 2004; Shirer et al. 2004). These practices are described below.

Determine realistic goals for the program you are designing. It is important to set realistic and flexible goals for what can be accomplished. For example, we learned that for many couples we have worked with, marriage was not a realistic or even safe goal for them. Instead of focusing on getting people married, focus on helping them build the interpersonal and personal life skills that build the foundation of a healthy relationship.

Focus your educational efforts on a specific target audience. It is also important to consider the target audience when offering relationship and marriage education. In addition to considering an audience with limited financial means, also consider race and ethnicity, community, and other differences. As well, consider a Marriage Plus Approach by including not only relationship education but other services as well that are needed to build strong and healthy families.

Be attentive to domestic violence concerns. An important consideration when working with any target audience on relationship and marriage education is the issue of domestic violence. It is strongly recommended that a relationship is developed with the local community's domestic violence program and that a screening process and protocol be established for addressing domestic violence issues when they arise.

Finding and testing innovative approaches to recruiting participants. Based on information gleaned from pilot testing of the *Caring for my Family* program (Shirer 2003), many strategies may prove useful for recruiting and working with low-resource audiences in relationship and marriage education programs:

- Use men, including former program participants, to recruit men to sign up for the class. Consider how the men will be involved in the program if you are not accustomed to having them in family life programs.

- Secure a time and location that fits the needs of your participants and helps them to feel comfortable. This may not be the local human services office, but could be a church or someone's home.
- Build partnerships with community agencies that can provide referrals to your program. If you are new at offering relationship and marriage education to low-resource couples, spend some time explaining what the program is designed to do and designed NOT to do. Even trusted community partners can be skeptical at first. Thus, building relationships with agencies that serve that population will be extremely useful.
- Examine other programs that are currently offered to low-resource families. Extension also has nutrition education or money management programs, and participants in these programs might also be interested in relationship and marriage education. Also consider offering relationship and marriage education in conjunction with parenting or childbirth education.
- Invite members of the target audience to a focus group where they examine the curriculum and other materials that will be used. Have them critique the materials and then modify them based on their critique. If possible, provide refreshments and compensate them for their time and expertise.

Selecting and training facilitators who can connect with the target audience. Quality of instruction makes or breaks any educational program. Extension, through its work with low-resource audiences, has learned that instruction needs to be warm, personal, engaging, interactive, and experiential. In addition, facilitators who can serve as positive role models for the participants and can see their strengths and assets are essential. Having a sense of humor, including the ability to laugh at oneself, is also effective. It is also important to have male co-facilitators and to have men involved in leadership roles by partnering with a local fathering program or a faith-based group that facilitates male involvement. Last, educators need to be aware of their limitations and avoid crossing the line of counselor or therapist. Community referral sources need to be in place for participants who need support beyond what the educator is able to deliver.

Working with culturally diverse audiences

Culturally diverse audiences usually have not had good experiences with the dominant European American, middle-class component of society; therefore, extra efforts need to be made in working with these audiences. Developing partnerships is important in effectively reaching not only low-resource audiences but also diverse populations. A significant distrust of the dominant culture may exist in culturally diverse populations. Leadership also needs to be shared and

partnerships formed with those who have the most relevant information and who operate at a level close to the issues (National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges 2002; Skogrand 2004).

Most Extension educators would agree that when providing programming in traditional ways, they typically do not have participation from diverse audiences. Even when educators deliberately advertise to diverse audiences, typically European American, middle-class attendees are attracted to the programs. What are educators doing wrong? Why don't the intended audiences come? Educators are likely not developing and implementing programming that is meeting the diverse audience's needs or that is consistent with their cultural values. Therefore, educators must learn about the audience they wish to serve in order to create programming that is culturally meaningful and relevant.

Strategies for learning about a diverse audience. There are several strategies that are useful in learning about an audience (Skogrand 2004):

- Read about the targeted population. The reading could include journal articles, books, and online materials. The field of marriage and family therapy has produced several books about values in various cultures. Authors such as McGoldrick (1998) and Sue and Sue (2003) and have provided overviews of various cultures. McAdoo (2007) and DeGenova (1997) have also written books about family ethnicity. Articles such as those of Anguiano and Kawamoto (2003) also provide information about cultural groups.
- Reading scholarly literature might be a place to start, but it is only the beginning. Every group served has values and needs that are unique within a local community. Therefore, educators must learn about the population locally, as well. For example, read newspapers created by and for the targeted population. To pick up on cultural values and practices, attend cultural events and celebrations to observe interactions between men and women, couples, and adults and children, for example.
- Visit locations frequented by the targeted population. For example, visiting locations such as grocery stores, market places, galleries, and restaurants can help an educator understand foods that are eaten, cultural influences, and history. These things all have an impact on relationships and family life.
- Identify a *cultural guide*, someone representing the diverse audience, who can teach about and help the educator enter the community. A formal or informal relationship can be developed with one or more cultural guides. For example, an individual may have an occasional, informal relationship with a person who answers questions. A more formal arrangement that includes regular meetings might also be important. In some cases,

depending on the time involved and the relationship, the cultural guide should be compensated for his or her time and knowledge. This compensation should be appropriate within the person's culture. In some cultures, money is not considered an appropriate gift to show appreciation; rather, giving an item of value within that culture may be more appropriate. Some individuals from some cultural groups are very willing to teach others about their culture and others are not. There are no clear-cut guidelines for how to find cultural guides, but they are likely to emerge as the other strategies are pursued. An attitude of respect for the culture and the cultural guide's way of teaching are important. Let the cultural guide teach in the way he or she chooses to teach, which may be the way that teaching is done in that culture. In some cultures, teaching is done through storytelling, and questions are not answered directly. If the Extension educator has a desire to learn and gain an appreciation for the richness of a specific culture, a member of the diverse audience will most likely emerge as a teacher.

In summary, all of this learning must occur with an attitude of respect. Sometimes an educator needs to observe and not participate in events (e.g., pow wows; Cinco de Mayo) because he or she does not understand the cultural significance of the activity. It is also important to know that learning takes time, and that it will continue for the duration of a relationship with a community.

Learning may be different. As an educator learns about a diverse population, he or she might begin to ask questions about how learning might affect the creation of a program. Educators are often very comfortable with participants sitting around a table with the educator providing information. PowerPoint slides might be used; coffee breaks might be included. A typical format might be for the educator to provide information, followed by equal time for a discussion by participants. Learning about a specific diverse audience through the strategies described so far may teach an educator that the educational model preferred by members of the dominant culture might not be appropriate for other audiences. Some questions one might ask after learning about a diverse population are

- How do members of this audience learn? For example, people in some cultures learn through storytelling, which is true in the American Indian culture.
- Who participates in learning? For example, Latino couples are less likely to participate in relationship and marriage education if they have to leave their children at home (Skogrand, Hatch, and Singh in press).
- Where does learning take place for this audience? As noted earlier, identify places for relationship and marriage education where the audience will feel comfortable and welcomed, such as schools or churches.

What has been provided is certainly not an exhaustive list of questions to be asked. This paper might raise other questions for you as you think about providing programming focusing on relationship and marriage education.

Lack of research about relationships and marriage in diverse audiences

As noted earlier, scholarly materials are available about *cultural themes and features* of diverse populations. However, very little *research* on marriage and family dynamics has been done with many culturally diverse populations. When research has been done, it usually compares a particular ethnic or low-resource population to European American, middle class couples and identifies what is wrong with the diverse population (Santiago-Rivera, Arredondo, and Gallardo-Cooper 2002). The research findings often do not describe the strengths present in these relationships or in the cultural or economic group that family life educators can capitalize on to help couples. Relationship and marriage education needs to validate the strengths of couple relationships and families, even though these strengths may clash with the values in the dominant culture (Santiago-Rivera et al.).

In addition, when research findings based on European American, middle-class couples are used to inform programming, education is not provided within a cultural context. As a result, couples from diverse populations may not attend, and if they do attend, they do not benefit. If members of diverse audiences do try to implement practices that are in conflict with strengths of their own populations, an educator can actually cause harm to the family because there can be a “cultural clash” that negatively affects family life. For example, if communication skills that are effective with the dominant culture are taught and they are different and clash with ways of communicating in the culturally diverse community, harm to that family system can be done. Currently, general cultural themes or features of the culture that are written about such as “family is an important value in the Latino culture” are often used to inform programming. Certainly this is helpful, but more research is needed about what makes families work in culturally diverse populations.

New research: Strong marriages in Latino culture

A rare and recent study about Latino marriages provides an example of how research findings about a cultural group can have implications for developing educational programming for a diverse audience (Skogrand, Hatch, and Singh in press). The goal of the study was to better understand what makes strong marriages in Latino culture in order to inform programming for other Latino couples who want to have strong relationships and marriages. Based on interviews with 25 Latino couples who had strong marriages, three major themes emerged and are summarized below along with implication for relationship and marriage education.

Children and family are central. Forty-seven of the 50 individuals in this study indicated that children were a key component in making the marriage strong, the “glue” that keeps the marriage and family together. One man in the study said, “a man can leave his wife, but he can’t leave his children,” so one needs to find a way to solve problems and not divorce. In addition, these couples made it clear that they typically did not do things as a couple, they only did things as a family. Thus, these couples did not talk about their marriage separate from family life, but rather their couple life was subsumed within the context of family life. Because the family is so important to members of this culture, educators need to reframe programming as being for the family. Content may be about how family members rely on and support each other, which can strengthen marriages and family life. In addition, educational programs need to provide opportunities that allow Latino couples to bring their children with them.

The importance of communication. Forty-five out of the 50 participants identified communication as a necessary component of having a strong marriage. These couples emphasized the importance of spending time together and talking often which would help them understand each other better. This understanding also led to greater love between them. They also indicated that couples needed to talk in order to solve problems and make decisions. These findings suggest that content about communication should be included in programming. The couples in the study did not talk about “I” messages or focus on listening skills. Instead, they simply talked about spending time together so they could talk to each other, better understand each other, and the result would be increased love between the husband and the wife.

The role of religion. Thirty-seven out of the 50 participants stated that religion was a key component in having a healthy marriage. Religion contributed to a healthy marriage by providing guidance to stay on the right path in marriage. It also provided spiritual strength to cope with crises, and it helped participants stay committed to their spouses. Because religion is an important value in Latino culture, relationship and marriage education for Latino couples might include content about how couples benefit from affiliations with religious institutions or how a spiritual connection can be helpful in marriage and family life. As well, programming should be planned in partnership with spiritual leaders. Religious leaders who serve Latinos appear to be trusted community leaders, and religious organizations might be trusted meeting places for couples.

Conclusions

Providing relationship and marriage education for low-resource and culturally diverse audiences creates new challenges for us as Extension educators. Needs, values, and teaching techniques are likely to be different than our traditional way of delivering educational programming. It is, however, within our historical mission to meet those challenges by doing what Extension educators have always done, which is getting to know our audiences. The future will require that

we use creative and innovative approaches to working with low-resource and ever increasing culturally diverse audiences.

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Cite this article

Skogrand, Linda and Karen Shirer. 2007. Working with low-resource and culturally diverse audiences. *The Forum for Family and Consumer Issues*, 12 (1).