

CULTURALLY RELEVANT PROGRAMMING IN ACTION: A CASE STUDY OF A
MARRIAGE EDUCATION PROGRAM FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN COUPLES

by

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(Under the Direction of JUANITA JOHNSON-BAILEY)

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. 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?

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.

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. The sub themes associated with each of these major themes are also presented.

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.

INDEX WORDS: Adult Education; African American Marriages; Culturally Relevant; Program Planning; Prevention Science

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents Marshall and Harriet Erwin, and to my brother Darnell Erwin. Your love and support during this journey have made all the difference in the world. Thank you for your prayers and encouragement, and for cheering me toward the finish line. I love you very much!

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Prevention Science has become a growing field by providing services to adults who want to learn alternative means of handling difficult life situations. These difficult life circumstances often interfere with a person's ability to maintain optimal health and well-being. Preventive interventions are designed to educate and empower individuals by addressing areas impacting adults, such as learning how to deal with the impact of mental illness; or an ongoing health crisis such as diabetes, high blood pressure, or heart disease. A growing segment of Prevention Science is devoted to addressing the psychological stressors that adults may encounter in family relationships, and a portion of this is devoted to addresses marital stress. Since a large percentage of adults are in marital relationships or intimate partnerships with others, greater attention is being devoted to helping adults learn to be in relationships with others.

The reason that intimate partnerships have become an area of focus within prevention science is due in part to the literature; the physical and emotional benefits of marriage are well-documented (Proulx, Helms, & Buehler, 2007). Previous research has shown that the development and maintenance of close relationships, particularly romantic relationships, are associated with physical and emotional well-being (Gottman & Levenson, 1992). Couples who are satisfied with their marital relationships report fewer instances of depression and anxiety. Marriage provides greater availability of emotional social support; the emotional and financial benefits of this relationship have a major impact on adult well-being (Choi & Marks, 2008). Even with the previously noted benefits of marriage, it is common for many couples to

experience conflict in their relationships. The demands of family life are often stressors for many couples (Amato, 2000). Some of the specific issues that lead to conflict include: money or financial concerns, childrearing responsibilities, and the division of household labor. Because many husbands and wives both work outside the home, the strain of balancing employment responsibilities with family obligations can cause tension in any marriage (Broman, 1998). Couples who report high levels of marital satisfaction demonstrate the ability to solve problems in a creative (and positive) manner; this leads to effective conflict resolution. Conflict that is prolonged and not satisfactorily resolved can lead to distress in the marital relationship, which may ultimately end in divorce (Fincham, 2003; Fincham & Beach, 1999; Gottman & Levenson, 1992).

When couples experience conflict, it can have a negative impact on physical and mental health of the individuals; among adults marital discord and divorce are associated with a variety of physical and psychological disorders (Bradbury & Fincham, 1998). Marital discord can also impair the welfare of the family unit and can influence family outcomes. Parenting ability is impacted due to the fact that mothers and fathers are distressed by their relationship issues, and are not as in tune with their children and do not operate as best they should. This leads to children being poorly adjusted and not securely attached to the parents. There are also greater instances of conflict between parent and child, as well as greater conflict between siblings (Amato, 2000; Umberson, Williams, Powers, Liu, & Needham, 2005).

Most interventions/treatments for marital distress traditionally have been limited to marital therapy. Unfortunately, only a small percentage of couples experiencing distress are willing to seek professional counseling; professional help has typically been available only after relationships have deteriorated (Silliman, Stanley, Coffin, Markman & Jordan, 2004). When

couples are in the early stages of marital distress (or experiencing low levels of conflict) they do not consider therapy as an option. Most couples do not seek the assistance of professionals trained in couples' therapy, but rather consult a clergy member such as a pastor or priest. One of the reasons that marital therapy is avoided is because of the considerable amount of time and money that is required. Another reason for avoiding therapy is the social stigma attached to psychotherapy. The fear of intrusion into the couples' private life by a stranger, as well as self-identifying as distressed enough to seek professional help are also factors that prevent couples from obtaining treatment. Because of these factors, couples counseling is often a last resort. Considering that marital therapy is often received too late to be effective, preventing marital distress from the beginning stages may be a more effective strategy (Bradbury & Fincham, 1999; Silliman et al., 2004).

Preventive interventions provide a solution to this issue by working to alleviate marital distress that may persist due to couples' unwillingness to seek professional counseling (Simmons & Harris, 1994). There are three levels of preventive interventions: primary, secondary, and tertiary. Primary interventions are designed for couples who are experiencing minimal levels of marital distress. This approach is proactive, and is intended to address normative issues the couple experiences as they transition through the family life cycle (e.g., job changes, or the transition to parenthood). Secondary interventions are designed for couples who are "at risk," meaning they are experiencing some distress or relationship impairment. This type of intervention is intended to prevent future dissatisfaction or the loss of desirable relationship characteristics. Tertiary interventions are for couples who are experiencing serious problems. Their relationship is at stake and the purpose of this type of intervention is to prevent further deterioration of the relationship and marital separation. It should be noted that there is much

overlap between these three levels of intervention (L'Abate, 1982; Mace, 1980; Powell & Cassidy, 2007). 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.

Marriage education is not a new idea and has been in existence in one form or another for many years. Marriage education programs are research-based and address issues that are connected to marital satisfaction such as a communication system that leads to understanding, the ability to creatively resolve conflict, and the ability to create and maintain intimacy. Many couples receive a form of marriage education through premarital counseling, which is usually conducted by clergy or a therapist. This is often limited to a few sessions prior to the marriage of the couple. Marriage preparation has also been a focus of courses offered in family studies, sociology, and psychology departments. These courses are usually taken by women, and though they are informative, they lack the skills-based emphasis of marriage education programs. (Berger & Hannah, 1999; Silliman et al., 2004).

Marriage rates for Americans have been shifting downwards over the last twenty years; this trend is especially noticeable for African Americans. The marriage rate of African Americans is currently 47% and considering that 50% of all marriages end in divorce, the marital relationships of African American couples are particularly vulnerable (Bryant & Wickrama, 2005). In light of the previously mentioned statistics, as well as the fact that there are few studies examining this aspect of the family life of African Americans, there is a need for research that

explores the unique social circumstances experienced by African American couples that impact their marital quality.

There have been several researchers who have examined factors that affect relationship quality among African American couples, though this is not an extensive body of literature. The marital relationships of African Americans are impacted by daily stressors related to family and work, but the impact of these stressors may be intensified by negative social interactions outside of the home. One of the stressors that is common for African Americans are experiences with racial discrimination. Racism is still a factor that is prevalent in American society, and often influences the experiences of African Americans (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Feagin & McKinney, 2003; Franklin & Boyd-Franklin, 2000). Family conflicts may be intensified as a result of experiences with discrimination and subsequent feelings of powerlessness (Feagin & McKinney, 2003; LaTailade, 2006).

When individuals deal with instances of discrimination in the outside world on the mezzo-level, this can have an impact on the micro-level by influencing dynamics with family or other intimate relationships. The damage of a racially hostile workplace, for example, does not end at the workplace door. Research has shown that racial discrimination can impact the physical and emotional health of individuals (Feagin & McKinney, 2003). This is often manifested psychologically as depression or anxiety, which both impact physical well-being. Individuals who encounter racism and discrimination in a work or social setting could carry the feelings of anger and frustration home, and project these feelings toward one another. This results in an increase in relationship conflict and distress. According to Boyd-Franklin (2003), these experiences with racism can negatively impact the couples' use of constructive communication patterns, and lead to verbal aggression. The emotional strain of these experiences can further

impact family dynamics by leading to a loss of energy and motivation to participate in the day-to-day activities of family life (Cowdery, Scarborough, Knudson-Martin, Seshadri, Lewis, & Mahoney, 2009; Feagin & McKinney, 2003).

Statement of the Problem

Marriage education programs are developed 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 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). The 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 the influence of culture is critical to addressing how interventions may be adapted or tailored to meet the needs of diverse families.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine a marriage education program designed for African American couples. The research questions are:

- 3) What are the common components of a culturally relevant program designed for African American couples?
- 4) What program delivery methods were most effective given the topic and the participant group?

Significance

Marriage education programs help to promote healthier families (Simons & Harris, 1994). Couples can be empowered by the knowledge gained, and this can have a positive impact on the relationship. One of the benefits includes an increase in marital satisfaction, which leads to greater physical and emotional well-being for each spouse. A stable family environment also improves the social and emotional outcomes of children. This type of intervention is designed to provide couples with the skills they need to deal with difficulties on their own, such as how to resolve conflict in a positive way; they also reach a wider audience than professional counseling alone. As a result of this study I gained a greater understanding of the ways that a preventive intervention, specifically a marriage education program, is tailored to meet the needs of African American couples.

Unfortunately, there is only a small amount of research examining the marital relationships of African Americans. There are stressors that impact all couples regardless of race and class, such as the strain of balancing work and family, the division of household labor, finances, and job-related stress (Marks, Nesteruk, Hopkins-Williams, Swanson, & Davis, 2006). The presence and influence of racism is acknowledged as an additional stressor affecting African

Americans, as well other people of color. Racism is an experience often encountered in external environments, such as workplace settings. The impact of both partners dealing with the strain of racism can have negative implications for the relationship. Therefore, it is crucial to equip couples with tools that will help them not only manage these stressors, but strengthen their relationship in the process (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Feagin & McKinney, 2003; LaTaillade, 2006; Marks et al., 2006).

There is an inadequate body of literature which expounds on the process of designing a culturally relevant marriage education program. This qualitative study, examined an African American Marriage Program, is an important 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 education, counsel, and study families. Whaley (2000) notes that one way to address the need for greater cultural sensitivity in interventions need 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. The study is also significant as a response to the challenge issued by Bernal and Saez-Santiago (2006) regarding the “articulation and documentation” of the influence of culture and ethnicity in psychosocial interventions. 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 can lead to greater participant satisfaction and more positive outcomes (Ancis, 2004).

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

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 that will guide this study are:

- 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?

In order to provide greater insight into the issues that shape this study, this chapter will explore the literature related to the following topics: prevention science, the influence of culture in educational settings, the influence of culture in preventive interventions, and African American family life.

Prevention Science

The work of prevention involves multiple scientific disciplines, including, medicine and public health, psychology, human development, and education. For many years, the field of public health has been concerned with the prevention of disease. However, prevention efforts do not focus solely on the prevention or treatment of physical illness, but these interventions are also designed to address other areas impacting human health and well-being (Albee, 1996; Eddy, Smith, Brown, & Reid, 2005; Howard, Taylor, Ganikos, Holder, Godwin, & Taylor, 1988). Stressful social conditions have a major influence on the mental health of individuals, by

disrupting families and damaging social relations (Hage, Romano, Conyne, Kenny, Matthews, Schwartz, & Waldo, 2007; Seccombe, 2004; White & Rogers, 2004). One of the goals of prevention science is to work to reshape the reality of persons suffering from physical or mental illness, substance abuse, or emotional distress. This is achieved primarily through the design and implementation of interventions that provide education, social support, and competency enhancement. (Holden & Black, 1999; Lerner, 2001; Reese, 2007; Wandersman & Florin, 2003).

History of Prevention Science

As early as the 1940s, public health experts began to focus on the prevention of mental disorders. During the administrations of Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy, there was considerable attention devoted to the absence of resources available for the treatment and care of the mentally ill. This was evidenced by the lack of resources needed to address the emotional/mental health problems affecting World War II veterans; professional mental health service providers were strained to meet the demand. Publicly funded mental hospitals and institutions were not in good condition and were not equipped to meet the level of demand. Prevention approaches were to be an alternative to individual treatment and were intended to prevent new cases from occurring. The assumption was that the best way to prohibit maladaptive problems was to equip people with personal and environmental resources for coping. The Joint Commission on Mental Illness and Health, established by Congress in 1955, mandated the development of prevention programs. This committee passed legislation that called for the establishment of community mental health centers across the country. These centers were to provide consultation and education, which included prevention programs (Albee, 1996; Albee & Gullotta, 1997; Mrazek & Haggerty, 1994).

This change in the treatment approach was also called community psychology, because this strategy was designed to place strong emphasis on prevention, as well as the need to address social and contextual influences on mental health (Albee, 1996; Albee & Gullotta, 1997; Mrazek & Haggerty, 1994). The vision for prevention work (or community psychology) was that prevention would happen through changes in communities; prevention was to be a community responsibility as was treatment. This vision was not fully realized for several reasons. One of the primary issues was funding; community mental health centers did not fully receive the funding intended by the original act. Additionally, most of the available funding for community mental health centers was used to treat existing disorders, not to prevention efforts. A third reason was the deinstitutionalization of state psychiatric hospitals resulted in community mental health centers being forced to treat the chronically mentally ill (Albee, 1996; Albee & Gullotta, 1997; Mrazek & Haggerty, 1994).

In 1982 the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) established the Center for Prevention Research, which began to coordinate preventive intervention research efforts. At a 1991 NIMH conference, the term prevention science was created (Albee, 1996; Albee & Gullotta, 1997). This term was used to describe a field “focused primarily on the systematic study of precursors for dysfunction and health, called risk and protective factors, with the aim to counteract risk factors and reinforce protective factors in order to disrupt processes that contribute to human dysfunction” (Coie, Miller-Jackson, & Bagwell, 2000, p. 99). This section provided a brief history of the field of prevention science. In the next section I will address the specific dimensions and key components of preventive interventions.

Dimensions of Preventive Interventions

As previously stated, the goal of prevention science is to prevent or lessen negative developmental outcomes or major human dysfunctions (Coie, Watt, West, Hawkins, Asarnow, Markman, Ramey, Shure, & Long, 1993; L'Abate, 1983; Mrazek & Hagerty, 1994). One way to achieve this is through the development of psycho-social interventions that are designed to address areas such as physical well-being, mental health issues, youth development, and family functioning. The three dimensions of preventive interventions are primary, secondary, and tertiary. Primary interventions are intended to stop the problem before it occurs; the focus is on the reduction of the onset of mental disorders or distress. Primary prevention efforts operate from the assumption that the best way to ward off maladaptive problems is to equip people with resources for coping (Albee & Gullotta, 1997; Coie et al., 2000; L'Abate, 1983; Pinsoff & Hambright, 2000). An example of primary prevention is a marriage education program designed for premarital couples. Pre-marriage education programs are designed for engaged couples to prepare them for married life. They address topics such as positive communication, finances and budgeting, and parenting.

The focus of secondary prevention is on the early identification and intervention with individuals who display early signs of problem behaviors or disorder, but have not experienced the disorder or disability to the full extent. Participants are usually at risk; but are not experiencing significant mental or emotional distress, or relationship impairment (Albee & Gullotta, 1997; Coie et al., 2000; L'Abate, 1983; Pinsoff & Hambright, 2001). Stepfamilies, for example, face unique challenges such as boundary uncertainty, stepparent-stepchild relationships, and the disciplinary role of the stepparent. The Stepfamily Enrichment Program is a preventive intervention that targets remarried couples. This multi-couple group intervention is

for remarried couples within three years of their remarriage. The program content is focused on areas such as normalizing the stepfamily experience, strengthening the marital bond, and strengthening the stepparent-stepchild relationship (Michaels, 2006).

Tertiary prevention approaches are designed for those who are experiencing serious problems, and they usually resemble traditional treatment approaches and would be facilitated by a therapist or counselor. The goal of tertiary prevention efforts is to prevent further deterioration or disability; to reduce the impact of a problem (Albee & Gullotta, 1997; Coie et al., 2000; L'Abate, 1983; Pinsoff & Hambright, 2001). An example of tertiary prevention can be seen an intervention for mentally ill patients and their families. Schizophrenia is a mental illness that has a significant impact not only on those suffering from it, but on their family members as well. Dr. Amy Wiseman has created a family treatment program that for individuals and families suffering from schizophrenia. This program is a psychoeducational treatment designed to address areas such as family cohesion, spiritual coping, communication training, and problem solving. The participants are already dealing with the reality of the illness, but this intervention works to empower families and reduce the impact of the disorder on their lives (Weisman, 2005).

Risk and Protective Factors

Though one of the objectives of prevention is to alter the course of human development in an optimal direction, you cannot attempt to change something unless you have at least a basic understanding of how it operates. One of the first steps towards positively influencing developmental trajectories is the understanding and altering of specific risk and protective factors that shape human behavior. Specifically, preventive interventions are designed to impede risk factors and promote protective factors in order to disrupt the processes that contribute to human dysfunction (Coie et al., 1993; Durlak, 1998; Mrazek & Haggerty, 1994). Risk factors refer to

characteristics of the individual, or the social or physical environment that increases the likelihood of the onset, severity, or duration of a disorder. A risk factor is an element that increases the probability of a future negative outcome (Coie et al., 2000; Durlak, 1998; Mrazek & Haggerty, 1994). It is the accumulation of risk, rather than the presence of one risk factor, that can have a negative impact. It is unusual for a single risk factor to cause a condition/disorder, instead combinations of risk factors at various levels have been found to be related to most problems or disorders. Risk factors may include individual, genetic, family, and community influences. A few examples of common risk factors are: poverty; a high crime or dangerous community; marital discord; lack of social support; or stress. If risk factors can be identified and altered in a timely manner, this can have a positive influence on a range of mental health problems. This can also help to impact job productivity, as well as reduce the need for health, social, and correctional services (Coie et.al, 2000; Durlak, 1998; Pinsoff & Hambright, 2001).

The effects of exposure to risk factors can be mitigated by a variety of individual and social characteristics that serve protective functions; these features are known as protective factors. As previously noted, the presence of multiple risk factors can lead to problems, but the presence of protective factors can have a buffering effect. Protective factors refer to characteristics or conditions that promote resistance to disturbance; they provide a buffer against the development of a disorder (Coie et al., 2000; Durlak, 1998; L'Abate, 1983; Mrazek & Haggerty, 1994; Pinsoff & Hambright, 2001). Examples of protective factors include: solid family relationships; social support; community support (social norms and effective social policies); and self-efficacy. These examples provided of risk and protective factors are general; these factors may vary depending upon the condition and the target group. The identification of risk and protective factors is an important step in the design of intervention strategies. Without a

clear understanding of these features, it is likely that a program will have no effect on the developmental trajectory of its participants (Coie et al., 2000; Durlak, 1998; Pinsoff & Hambright, 2001; Nation, Crusto, Wandersman,, Kumpfer, Seybolt, Morrissey-Kane, & Davino, 2003). The discussion will now shift to specific steps in the process of designing a preventive intervention.

Preventive Intervention Research and Design

In their work on prevention science, Coie et al., (2000) describe the preventive intervention research cycle as a process that functions as a feedback loop with five distinct steps/stages. The first step is to identify the problem or disorder(s) and review information to determine its extent. Researchers must also be aware of the risk and protective factors that impact the area of concern. This is important to the second step in the process, which is to review relevant information from fields outside prevention and from existing preventive intervention research programs. The third stage in the preventive intervention research cycle is to design, conduct, and analyze pilot studies and confirmatory and replication trials of the preventive intervention program. Once this is accomplished, the fourth stage in the research cycle is design, conduct, and analyze large-scale trials of preventive intervention programs. The final step is to facilitate large-scale implementation and ongoing evaluation of the preventive intervention program in the community (Coie et al., 1993; 2000; Howard et al., 1988; Pinsoff & Hambright, 2001).

The Parents Matter! Program (PMP) is an example of a community-based family intervention program. The goal of the program was to prevent risky sexual behavior among adolescents (Dittus, Miller, Kotchnick, & Forehand, 2004). The researchers believed it was important for parents not only to be aware of the risks associated with sexual activity, but

subsequently address these risks with their children at an early age. As a result, the Parents Matter! Program was designed to promote positive parenting and effective parent-child communication as the primary means of inhibiting risky sexual behavior among youth/adolescents. Parents learned about the importance of monitoring their children, and they also learned the skills necessary to be comfortable talking with their adolescent about sex. There were four key steps involved in the development of this preventive intervention. The first step was to identify risk and protective factors affecting the target population. One of the primary risk factors among the target group was adolescent sexual activity. A protective factor that would have a buffering effect against this risk factor was positive communication between the parent and their child. The next step in the process was to identify specific parent outcomes. This refers to the skills that planners/researchers wanted to be developed or enhanced in parents as a result of participation in the program, such as the ability to convey values and expectations about sexual behavior with their youth. Third, was to identify immediate outcomes of PMP for the adolescent. Specifically, the researchers wanted to influence the adolescents' attitudes about sex. The fourth step was to identify long-term outcomes for the adolescent, which is for the adolescent to choose to delay sexual behavior (Dittus, Miller, Kotchnick, & Forehand, 2004; Murry, Kotchick, Wallace, Ketchen, Eddings, Heller, & Collier, 2004).

According to Borkowski, Akai, and Smith (2007), the process of developing prevention programs requires a balance between art and science. The authors go on to say that the principles of effective prevention programs can be grouped into three categories: treatment principles, procedural principles, and design and evaluation principles. Treatment principles focus on factors that shape the design of the curriculum. An effective prevention program must incorporate several dimensions. Effective interventions should be: theory-driven;

comprehensive; employ varied teaching methods; there must be positive relationships; and the intervention must have sociocultural relevance. A preventive intervention should be grounded in a relevant theoretical framework. One reason for the importance of theory is for explaining the relationship between the variables/constructs to be influenced by the intervention. In order for a program/intervention to be comprehensive, researchers need to be fully aware of the factors that influence development, and ultimately the problem behavior. The authors note that researchers and planners need to be sure that there are multiple intervention components to address all aspects of the problem. Varied teaching methods are important and help to ensure that essential intervention components are tailored for participants of different backgrounds, abilities, and learning styles. The use of varied teaching methods keeps learners engaged, and helps to ensure that participants grasp relevant concepts and skills.

Positive relationships are a vital component of any program. The development of positive relationships between professionals and program recipients creates a sense of connectedness. This rapport not only helps to reduce program attrition, but it also helps to assure participants that program staff are committed to helping them make positive gains, and don't see them as problems to be fixed. A final key dimension of program design is the importance of sociocultural relevance. This simply means that all aspects of the prevention program should be tailored to the specific cultural and community norms of the participants (Borkowski, Akai, & Smith, 2007; Coie et al., 2000; Nation et al., 2003). The purpose of this section was to highlight key areas of prevention science, such as the history and an overview of prevention science, and the development of a preventive intervention. This section will conclude with a brief overview of the history of marriage education, followed by a discussion of marriage education as a preventive intervention.

History of Marriage Education

From its early stages, marriage education has been offered in various formats and in different locations, but with the goal of helping prepare couples for marriage or assist them in strengthening their existing marriage. For example, the Philadelphia Marriage Council created a premarital education program in the early 1940s. This program was designed to educate couples about marriage, and teach them how to work through interpersonal problems (Powell & Cassidy, 2007).

Beginning in the 1930s through the mid 1960s, the marriage education movement grew on college and university campuses throughout the United States (Bailey, 1987; Mace, 1983; Powell & Cassidy, 2007). The growth of this movement was in response to what social scientists at the time believed was a crisis. This crisis was that the American family was at risk; due in part to the urbanization and industrialization of society. This societal shift had interfered with the transmission of values and practical knowledge to youth (Bailey, 1987; Mace, 1983). In her work detailing the origins of marriage education on college campuses, Bailey (1987) notes that marriage education courses officially began at the University of North Carolina in 1927. Family sociologist Ernest Groves began teaching marriage education courses, in response to a request from a group of senior males for a practical marriage course. Groves began working with colleague and fellow sociologist Howard Odum, and the marriage education movement began to grow on college campuses (Bailey, 1987).

Marriage and family therapists David and Vera Mace are acknowledged as pioneers in the development of marriage education programs (Albee & Gullotta, 1997; Mace, 1982; 1983; Powell & Cassidy, 2007). This husband and wife team was inspired by the work of Father Gabriel Calvo, a Catholic priest who began Marriage Encounter (marriage enrichment retreats)

in Barcelona, Spain. The Maces began leading marriage retreats for couples in the United States. The goal of their work during these retreats was to prevent marital breakdown that leads to couples becoming emotionally estranged from one another (Mace, 1982; 1983).

Marriage Education as Prevention

As previously stated, one of the main goals of any preventive intervention is to prevent or lessen negative developmental outcomes or major human dysfunctions. L'Abate (1983) defines prevention in the following way, "Prevention consists of any approach, procedure, or method designed to improve interpersonal competence and functioning for people as individuals, as partners in intimate relationships, and as parents" (p. 51). There is a segment of prevention education that focuses on promoting the well-being of families (Mace, 1983; Pinsof & Hambright, 2001; Powell & Cassidy, 2007). Preventive approaches are designed for couples who are functioning well and are not experiencing serious problems in their relationship; these programs are based on psychoeducational, skills-based models. These programs focus on the couples' strengths and promote relationship well-being. Risk factors are not ignored, but preventive programs emphasize the increase of protective factors such as positive communication, attitudes, and intimacy (Berger & Hannah, 1999; Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Mace, 1983; Silliman, Stanley, Coffin, Markman, Jordan, 2001).

Preventive interventions for couples are designed to promote relationship stability and satisfaction (Berger & Hannah, 1999; Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Mace, 1983). These interventions are designed for couples whose relationship is not in crisis, they just want to enhance the potential for relationship wellness in their marriage. As a result, the information presented in a marriage education program (the content) is from a skills-based approach. These programs are designed to equip couples with the skills/tools they need to handle the problems

they will encounter, and to stop negative interactions. One way to do this is by teaching couples how to handle negative emotions and conflict. Preventive education programs not only target risk factors, but also target important protective factors of the relationship such as commitment, friendship, spiritual connection, and intimacy. These factors are associated with the positive side of relationships (Berger & Hannah, 1999; Silliman et al., 2001). Marriage education programs are research-based and address issues that are connected to marital satisfaction: a communication system that leads to understanding, the ability to creatively resolve conflict, and the ability to create and maintain intimacy (Berger & Hannah, 1999; Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Markman, Stanley, Jenkins, Petrella, & Wadsworth, 2006; Mace & Mace, 1983; Powell & Cassidy, 2007; Silliman et al., 2001).

Educational programs are an important component of the field of Adult Education. Programs can vary by form and may include a class, series of classes or an event; it may also be a project, a workshop, or a conference. Whatever the format may be, the goal of a program is to promote/facilitate the process of learning in program participants. A portion of the program planning process involves establishing program objectives and determining the most effective manner to meet these objectives. Education for family life, however, has not been especially prominent in the field of Adult Education (Eastman, 1994). Family functioning, whether positive or negative has an impact not only on the individual level, but this also has an effect throughout the community.

Several researchers address the influence of culture as a key aspect of prevention research and interventions (Castro, Barrera, & Martinez, 2004; Dumas, Rollock, Prinz, Hops, & Blechman, 1999; Kumpfer, Alvarado, Smith, & Bellamy, 2002). Their assertion is that greater success can be expected of prevention programs that are structured in a manner that incorporates

the adaptive fit between people and their environments. In order to do this, researchers and planners must be aware of the personal history, cultural context, and life stage of the participant. Cervero and Wilson (2000) echo a similar perspective about the importance of culture of the participants in program planning. They maintain that planners of educational programs for adults should connect the needs of the participants (stakeholders'), to the social and historical contexts that shape their lives. These are factors that shape/influence the experiences of the stakeholders (their worldview) and will subsequently affect the structure and outcome of the program. Social or cultural context is important, because behavior that is considered normal (or deviant) in one culture may not be so in other cultures. Subsequently, prevention programs that are effective in one culture may not be as effective in other cultures (Dumas et al., 1999).

As previously stated, preventive interventions are designed to impede adverse developmental outcomes; this is achieved primarily through psycho-social interventions. If the intervention components are intended to promote healthy functioning or alleviate certain conditions, then they must specify what is normal, socially accepted, and valued. Culture must be included if the intervention is to successfully address the needs of diverse populations (Bernal, 2006; Biglan, Mrazek, Carnine, & Flay, 2003; Botvin, 2004; Reese & Vera, 2007). The next section is a brief exploration of the definition of culture, followed by a discussion about the relationship between culture and learning.

Culture and Learning

There has been a great deal of attention in recent years to the importance of providing services that meet the needs of an increasingly diverse population. These efforts have been apparent in many disciplines such as: health and medicine; psychology and counseling; and education. Culturally sensitive interventions can enhance the benefits of the program/treatment,

as well as the long-term outcomes (Ancis, 2004; Bernal, 2006; Botvin, 2004). In educational settings, culturally relevant teaching positively impacts student achievement and well-being (Ladson-Billings, 1992). The influence of culture is connected to many aspects of an individual's lived experienced.

Culture is often considered broad and difficult to define (Betancout & Lopez, 1993; Guy, 1999; O'Hagan, 1999; Tillman, 2002; Triandis, 1996). Betancourt & Lopez (1993) define culture as a system of meaning that is passed along from one generation to another. Culture refers not only to symbols, but a sense of connection and familiarity; it is the way group members have of relating to one another. These symbols reference the central beliefs of culture and answer questions such as: "How do you make sense of your world; what do you believe and why; and what are the institutions and organized frameworks that are used to establish contacts with one another?" (Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, 2003; p. 38). Culture is socially transmitted intergenerationally and is also described as a specific social group's shared set of values, beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and language (Betancourt & Lopez, 1993; Guy, 1999; Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, 2003). These elements are used within systems to address areas such as communication patterns, familial roles, and spirituality. It is important to note that culture is not static, furthermore, individuals are not bound to one specific culture but represent multiple cultural realities (Betancout & Lopez, 1993; Guy, 1999; Hecht et al., 2003; O'Hagan, 1999; Triandis, 1996).

As it relates to educational settings and practices as well as research agendas, unfortunately, culture is often defined and explored from a "value-neutral and positivistic perspective". This is problematic because, as previously stated, culture is derived from the lived experiences of social groups (Darder, 1991). Guy (1999) notes that within American society,

self-identity is valued over ethnic identity and a mono-cultural perspective (mainly Anglo and Western European traditions) have been favored. This perspective abandons cultural differences in favor of a “melting pot” ideology that values mainstream culture, or American culture.

Mainstream culture becomes dominant culture in American society because of the element of power, which determines what truth is shared as well as who or what is valued; or as Guy (1999) states, dominant culture points to issues of oppression, discrimination, and exclusion (Darder, 1991; Guy, 1999).

In contrast to the mono-cultural perspective, the constructivist perspective makes room for experiential knowledge; knowledge is the outcome of experience (Packer & Goicoechea, 2000; Triandis, 1989). As humans, each of us creates our own “mental modes” or rules used to make sense of our experiences. Knowledge is the outcome of experience; it is mediated by one’s prior knowledge and experience with others. These experiences mold our understanding of the world in which we live, so educators and practitioners must understand the “mental models” students use to make sense of the world and the assumptions supporting these models. A constructivist approach to learning promotes the use of a curricula customized to the student’s prior (cultural) knowledge (Bonk & Cunningham, 1998; Crotty, 2003; Packer & Goicoechea, 2000; Triandis, 1989; 1996; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995). Educators should tailor their teaching strategies to student’s needs and responses. Additionally, sociocultural theory addresses the interaction of culture and context in which learning occurs. This theory is based on Vygotsky’s theories of learning. The basic tenets of socioocultural theory are:

- 1) Human thought is best understood from a complex, chronological perspective;

- 2) An individual's development of advanced thought processes is rooted in his or her own personal sociocultural history and experience, and;
- 3) The psychological behavior of human beings is mediated or facilitated by signs, symbols, and languages at individual and collective levels of experience (Bonk & Cunningham, 1998; Packer & Goicoechea, 2000; Miller, 2000).

One of the assumptions of this theory is that learning is not value-free; it is always filtered through an individual's cultural lens. In light of the fact that learning is always situated within culture, it is important for educators and practitioners to understand the cultural contexts of their students (Alfred, 2002; Bonk & Cunningham, 1998; Crotty, 2003; Packer & Goicoechea, 2000; Triandis, 1989; 1996; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995).

Influence of Culture in Educational Settings

The training done in Prevention Science is like other areas of education in that it is affected by the culture of the discipline, the participants, and the trainers. Therefore, the educational settings typical of Prevention Science training need to be examined. On the whole, learning environments are not exempt from the influence of dominant culture. Eurocentric values have traditionally been the norm in these settings for both children and adult learners (Darder, 1991; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995). Hegemony refers to the dominance of a social group, specifically, when the dominant beliefs, values, and social practices are produced and distributed throughout a whole range of institutions such as schools, the family, and mass media (Darder, 1991).

According to Darder (1991) there are four ways that hegemony is actualized in educational settings through the curriculum. The first way is through the selection of cultural

values and materials deemed socially legitimate. The categories utilized for classifying certain cultural context and forms as superior and inferior is another way that hegemony influences classroom settings. A third way that the values and social practices of the majority shape educational interactions is through the selection and legitimation of school and classroom relationships. The distribution and access to different types of culture and knowledge by different social classes is also a way to reinforce the ideals of the dominant group (Darder, 1991).

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Ladson-Billings' (1990; 1992; 1996) research has investigated the educational experiences of African American students in the classroom. Much of this work stems from a desire to improve teaching so that the classroom better matches the homes and communities of students of color who were not having academic success. She has specifically focused on culturally relevant pedagogy. Pedagogy (the art, science, or profession of teaching) is a term that refers to the teaching-learning transaction that takes place in classroom settings, i.e., how teachers instruct their students and what they believe to be true about the teaching-learning transaction between teacher and students.

Ladson-Billings (1990; 1992; 1996) observed teachers with the context of the classroom to discover the specific aspects of their practice that promoted the success and well-being of African American students. She was concerned about the low levels of academic achievement among Black students, whose test scores lagged behind those of White students. She also noted that a disproportionate number of Black students were in special education, not to mention the alarming (and consistent) suspension and drop-out rate among this population. Her analysis of various classroom settings revealed a disconnect between Black students and their educational settings. One of the problems she noted among Black students was that academic success was

attributed to “acting White.” Black students were able to succeed in the classroom, but often at the cost of psychological and emotional issues, such as isolation.

Traditional classrooms have emphasized specific norms for classroom behavior for teachers and students that were not inclusive of varying cultural norms (Darder, 1991). Ladson-Billings’ (1990; 1992; 1996) research began to focus on classrooms where Black students were successful. This meant students were academically successful, but not to the detriment of their emotional well-being. Her research focused on the practices of the teachers, who are responsible for facilitating the learning environment. She wanted to know more about the specific practices of the teachers that promote academic success for students of different cultures. Ladson-Billings (1992) describes culturally relevant teaching as the kind of teaching that “is designed not merely to fit the school culture to the students’ culture but also to use student culture as the basis for helping students understand themselves and others, structure social interactions, and conceptualize knowledge” (p. 314).

According to Ladson-Billings (1995), there are three criteria for culturally relevant pedagogy: students must experience academic success; students must develop or maintain cultural competence; and students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo or the current social order. Ladson-Billings states that the goal of culturally relevant teaching is to empower students, so that they critically examine the world around them and work for social change (Ladson-Billings, 1990; 1992; 1995).

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 factor 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.

She suggested several factors that help promote retention of Black students in ABE programs. One factor is the importance of connecting learning to lived experience, 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 notes 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 asserts 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).

Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (1995) maintain that culturally responsive teaching should be inclusive. The background and current circumstances of each participant must be treated with equal respect. The diversity of participants must be respected and educators must engage the motivation of all learners. The work of culturally responsive teaching requires the creation of a safe, inclusive, and respectful learning environment, not just between instructors and participants, but students must demonstrate this with one another as well. This attention to culture does not only apply to classroom/educational settings, but to research and intervention approaches as well. Tillman (2002) speaks to this issue in her examination of the impact of culture in research and practice. She states, “Culturally sensitive research approaches both recognize ethnicity and position culture as central to the research process” (Tillman, 2002, p. 3).

Influence of Culture in Prevention Science

It is important for interventions to address the particular contexts in which participants are embedded. It cannot be assumed that an intervention that is effective within one particular context (i.e., White, middle class participants) will be equally effective in other contexts. As previously noted, culture is an integral part of one’s identity. Unfortunately, most prevention programs are based on White, middle class values. The cultural deficit perspective has resulted in families and individuals from different cultural backgrounds being examined through the lens of deficit and instability. This deficit perspective has been dominant has shaped community intervention work and designed among people of color for many years (Demos, 1990; Dumas, Rollock, Prinz, Hops, & Blechmen, 1999; and Reese & Vera, 2007).

In recent years, the field of prevention education has devoted considerable attention to the importance of creating interventions that address key cultural dimensions in the lives of participants (Kumpfer, Alvarado, Smith, & Bellamy, 2002). Researchers and practitioners have addressed the need to design and implement interventions that are successful in different settings and among participants from different backgrounds (Castro, Barrera, & Martinez, 2004). Within the prevention education literature, there are several key terms to describe this process. They include: cultural competence (Benkert, Guthrie, & Tanner, 2005), cultural sensitivity (Kumpfer et. al., 2002), cultural-responsiveness (Collins, Murphy, & Bierman, 2004) and cultural relevance (Reese & Vera, 2007). Each of these terms refers to the integration of cultural norms and values into practice, as well as preventive and therapeutic interventions. Cultural competence and cultural responsiveness refer to the development of a set of skills to enhance professional practice. Cultural sensitivity and cultural relevance refer to specific components of preventive interventions, such as the curriculum materials.

The body of research that examines cultural competence has focused primarily on ways to enhance professional practice. Benkert, Tanner, Guthrie, Oakley, and Pohl (2005) examined the impact of cultural competence skills in the professional life of nurse practitioners. The authors assert that the first step in the process toward cultural competence is personal reflection on individual beliefs. The authors maintain that achieving cultural competence involves the interaction of factors such as knowledge (about self and others), sensitivity, relationships, and skills. According to Benkert et al., (2005) becoming a culturally competent practitioner is always a work-in-progress. To be successful in this process, the knowledge gained about cultural differences must be combined with self-reflection as well as interaction (and discussion) with others. This reflection must examine areas of bias and prejudice. Additionally, in a study

addressing the importance in incorporating diversity in family life education programs, Wiley and Ebata (2004) noted that an important first step in designing culturally a relevant intervention is introspection. They go on to say that educators' must examine themselves to address their personal values as well as areas of bias (Benkert et al., 2005; Wiley & Ebata, 2004).

As previously noted, the terms cultural relevance and cultural sensitivity are used in reference to intervention objectives and curriculum. This means that culturally sensitive programs take into account the factors that shape the worldview of the participants, such as the values, experiences and beliefs of the target population (Dumas et al., 1999; Kumpfer et al., 2002). The researchers also note that historical, environmental, and social forces must also be integrated into every aspect of preventive interventions from program design, all the way through the evaluation phase (Castro, Barrera, & Martinez, 2004; Dumas et al., 1999). In their work on preventive education (for the prevention of substance abuse), Resnicow, Soler, Braithwaite, Ahluwalia, & Butler (2000) make an important distinction regarding the dimensions of culturally sensitive interventions. The authors note that an intervention that is culturally sensitive may incorporate culture on the surface or it may be deeper. These dimensions are referred to as surface structure and deep structure.

Surface structure refers the messages and materials of the intervention. Program materials, such as books, pamphlets, and handouts should match the characteristics of the target population. This surface approach gives the appearance of "cultural appropriateness" by packaging the information in a manner that is likely to be appealing to a specific group. These materials are immediately recognizable by participants and can provide a sense of comfort, establish credibility of the information source, and generate interest (Kreuter & Haughton, 2006; Resnicow et al., 2000). Deep structure refers to the foundational elements of the intervention.

Specifically, the way that the program incorporates key principles affecting participants into program design. The deep structure should address the cultural aspects that influence a specific group. Using this sociocultural approach the cultural values, beliefs, and behaviors of a group should be recognized, and built on to provide meaning and context to the messages and information of the intervention (Kreuter & Haughton, 2006; Resnicow et al., 2000).

Kreuter and Haughton (2006) examined the impact of integrating culture into a cancer prevention program designed for urban African American women. The researcher selected four constructs that were considered prevalent among their target demographic – religiosity, collectivism, racial pride, and time orientation. According to the investigators, the message “mammograms protect your health so that you can be there for your family” builds on the cultural value of collectivism, while the message “mammograms help address a serious health problem that is affecting many African American women” speaks to racial pride. The result of their study was that the integration of culture into the intervention, specifically tailoring the messages on behavioral constructs, increased the effectiveness of the intervention.

Researchers (Hancock & Siu, 2009) working with Latino immigrant males to provide court ordered domestic violence treatment to Latino immigrant males, found the traditional treatment approach/model to be ineffective. Not only was participant attendance low and sporadic, but many of the relationships of the couples in the groups ended. The existing treatment disregarded the cultural norms and values that shaped participants’ worldviews; this made the curriculum unsuccessful with the target population. The Latino males participating in this intervention did not have an egalitarian perspective of male-female relationships. On the contrary, the expectation was of unequal power relations between men and women. An important step towards designing an intervention that met the needs of participants, was the incorporation

of a culturally sensitive approach, specifically, the incorporation of key foundational elements (deep structure). The goal of the intervention was still to correct the males' aggressive and violent behaviors toward their wives/girlfriends. The shift in the intervention was to foster this "genuine commitment to change" by appealing to the positive aspects of their cultural values and traditions, particularly the importance of their families (Hancock & Siu, 2009).

This study examines Prevention Science as it relates to African American married couples. On the whole the sociological and marriage and family studies literature do not attend to African Americans as a specific group. Instead the group routinely examined is White Americans. In the next section, the limited studies on African American married couples will be synthesized.

A Cultural Examination of African American Families

The influence of dominant cultural values in American society has affected the focus of research, specifically the lens used to examine African American families. The majority of research on Black families examined these family systems using such ideological perspectives such as: the cultural deviant approach (or the culture of poverty framework); the cultural equivalent approach; and the cultural variant approach. According to the cultural deviant approach, the values and norms of White, middle-class families are the standard, and any behaviors or patterns of Black families that are not like those of the referent group are considered deviant (Demos, 1990; Murry, 2000; Staples & Johnson, 1993). The cultural equivalent perspective focuses on the similarities between Black and White family systems, however, the norms and values of White, middle-class families provide the standard by Black families are measured (Demos, 1990; Murry, 2000; Staples & Johnson, 1993). The cultural variant approach emphasizes the cultural patterns of Black families to explain the experiences of family life; not in

comparison to White, middle-class norms (Demos, 1990; Murry, 2000; Staples & Johnson, 1993).

A study by Demos (1990) highlighted the presence of this negative view of African American families in the literature. He conducted a study in which he analyzed 283 empirical articles that examined some aspect of the lives of Black Americans. The analysis was of articles found in the *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, in volumes published from 1939 to 1987. One of the results of his analysis was that the most dominant theme is the “culture of poverty.” This finding is attributed to the number of studies that focused on topics such as: poverty, welfare, illegitimacy, and female headship. Specifically, Demos (1990) found that of the published articles that examined the lives of Black Americans, 20% were from the “culture of poverty” or cultural deviant perspective. This is problematic because as the researcher noted, these articles “indirectly reinforce a distorted image of Black Americans.”

This also reinforces the view of Black Americans as problematic and Black families as deficient (Demos, 1990; McAdoo, 1997; Murry, 2000; Staples & Johnson, 1993; Staples, 1999). Demos (1990) offers at least two explanations for the disproportionate number of research studies that examine the family life of Black Americans from the cultural deviant perspective. He attributes it, in part, to the report written by Daniel Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. He further explains that a considerable amount of grants and other federal funding for research, could be obtained by conducting studies that explored the social problems of Black families.

The Moynihan Report (1967) is an example of the use of the cultural deviant approach in the study of Black families. This research report provided a negative characterization of Black families that has not only influenced policies and programs, but also shaped research agendas for

the next twenty years. This report, written by Daniel Patrick Moynihan in 1967, stated that the structure of Black families was disintegrating, and they were moving towards extinction. This report, which was not an accurate portrayal of the majority of Black families, described Black families as systems that were unstable and disorganized, and who lacked values. Unfortunately, this negative portrayal of Black families is still present. The description of Black families often focuses on single mothers raising children, living in high-crime neighborhoods, and dependent of welfare. This has resulted in research agendas that focus on the crises in Black families, and what is wrong with Black families (Demos, 1990; McAdoo, 1997; Murry, 2000; Staples & Johnson, 1993; Staples, 1999).

Social-Historical Influences Impacting African American Families

This section addresses some of the factors that have influenced family formation and family structure, past and present. An historic influence on African American families is the institution of slavery. It should be noted that scholars hold differing opinions about the impact of slavery on the structure and function of African American families. Some scholars and historians believe that the institution of slavery completely destroyed the family unit of African Americans, and fostered conditions that made it impossible to create and maintain stable families. This section continues with a discussion of the laws and policies in the years after slavery that continued to have an impact on the lives of African American families.

According to Pinderhughes (2002), slavery was detrimental to family structure. The author noted three distinct ways in which slavery undermined family, specifically marital, relationships. One way was through legislation passed in several states during this time that forbid slaves to marry. The second issue noted by the author was the sexual exploitation of male and female slaves. Male slaves were considered breeders who were responsible for increasing the

labor supply; and it was not uncommon for female slaves to be sexually exploited by slave owners (Franklin & Moss, 2000; Pinderhughes, 2000). In 1808, the United States passed a law that prohibited slaves from being imported into the U.S. This act negatively impacted the slaves; women in particular, who were expected to continually increase the slave population (Lui, Robles, Leondar-Wright, Brewer, & Adamson, 2006). A third factor affecting family structure was that family members could be sold and separated at a moment's notice. According to Pinderhughes (2002), each of these factors was detrimental to family structure because they undermined the emotional bonds and social structure necessary to promote solid couples and families (Franklin & Moss, 2000; Pinderhughes, 2000).

Staples and Johnson (1993) hold a different opinion about the influence of slavery on family relationships. They assert that family systems during this period were an important survival mechanism. These family systems provided members with love, companionship, and empathy in their suffering. Staples and Johnson (1993) also note that slave parents tried to protect their children from the shock of bondage, and tried to instill personal values and foster self-esteem. The authors do note that the institution of slavery attempted to undermine the structure and function of Black families. Male slaves were not allowed to function as protector and provider for their families, and female slaves, as previously noted, were often subjected to sexual exploitation at the hands of slave owners. According to Staples and Johnson (1993), despite the previously mentioned conditions, slavery did not weaken the value of marriage among Black families. They believe this is reflected in the significant numbers of African American men and women who were legally married following emancipation.

Once slavery ended, there were laws passed that attempted to provide African Americans basic rights. For example, the establishment of laws such as the Civil Rights Act of 1866 gave

Black men the right to own property, enforce contracts, sue in court, and have legal protection. Additionally, in March 1865 Congress established the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, also known as the Freedmen's Bureau. One of the main goals of the organization was to assist African Americans as they made the transition from slavery to freedom. Some of the services the Freedmen's Bureau provided African Americans included: food, clothing, and medical care; assistance with locating lost relatives; help with negotiating labor and property contracts; and aid in establishing schools and churches. Sadly, this organization faced much resistance, especially in the southern regions of the United States. The Freedmen's Bureau was abolished by Congress in 1872 (Franklin & Moss, 2000; Lui, Robles, Leondar-Wright, Brewer, & Adamson, 2006; Staples & Johnson, 1993).

During this time of what seemed to mark the beginnings of progress for African Americans, they continued to be subjected to practices and policies that were openly racist. Systems like sharecropping, for instance, were often used to exploit African American farmers and prevent them prospering. The creation of the Black Codes in the southern states is one example of how the law was used to keep African Americans subordinate. These laws established conditions that were oppressive. Specifically, the Black Codes were designed to replicate the social control and restriction of slavery. Some examples of these laws are: freedmen could not assemble without a White person present; freedmen could only be employed for certain jobs (such as farming and domestic work) and these duties and their work hours were tightly regulated; freedmen could not learn to read or write; and public facilities were segregated. It should be noted that these laws varied from state to state. The Black Codes eventually became the Jim Crow laws, and they remained in effect until they were made illegal by the Civil Rights

Act of 1964 (Franklin & Moss, 2000; Lui, Robles, Leondar-Wright, Brewer, & Adamson, 2006; Staples & Johnson, 1993).

In order to escape the harsh conditions of life in the South, many African Americans moved North and West during the years 1900 through 1930. The industrial jobs found in Northern cities provided a decent salary and benefits not found in the South. These employment opportunities made middle-class living standards possible for African Americans; this was also a time of growth of Black-owned businesses (Lui et al., 2006). The Great Depression, however, financially devastated many families Black and White. The federal government established an organized welfare system through the development of various New Deal programs. This system provided emergency relief measures, and while these programs were largely federally funded, local authorities were the administrators and set their own rules (Lui, et al., 2006). In their book examining the historical and social conditions that fostered wealth inequality in the United States, Liu et al., (2006) note that especially in the South, there was a discrepancy in the amount of aid received by Black and White families; Black families were given less aid money each month (Liu et al., 2006).

Some of the programs created during this time also negatively impacted the family structure of African Americans. Historically, the program Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) did not provide assistance to children in two-parent households. The father of the children could not live in the home with the family if they were to receive financial assistance. Additionally, if the father of the children did not live in the home but provided even a small amount of financial support, then welfare assistance could be at risk. Though welfare in this country has since been reformed, most notably through the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act in 1996, the old policies were damaging to Black families

and left residual effects even once the policies were changed (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Liu et al., 2006; Staples & Johnson, 1993; Staples, 1999).

This section provided an overview of just some of the events, laws, and policies that impacted the lived experience of Black families. The discussion will now shift to the strengths and stressors of African American family life. This is followed by a discussion about the current factors influencing rates of marriage among African American couples. This next section of the literature review will conclude with an exploration of current research on various aspects of marital relationships among African Americans.

Strengths of African American Family Life

These strengths of African American families are important because they serve as resources that can help to reduce conflict and prevent distress and instability in family relationships. One of the strengths of African American families is spirituality/religion. Historically, religion has been a source of solace/comfort and strength in the face of oppression, such as during slavery (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Franklin & Moss, 2000; Staples & Johnson, 1993; Staples, 1999). The importance of spirituality has been passed down from generation to generation. Among African Americans, participation in church and religious activities is associated with positive well-being (Haight, 1998; Marks, Nesteruk, Swanson, Garrison, & Davis, 2005; Taylor, Mattis, & Chatters, 1999). A strong religious orientation, as well as church involvement is a predictor of relationship quality among African American couples (Taylor et al., 1999). Though the church provides instruction in many areas related to the well-being of African American families, there is great emphasis placed on family and promoting close family ties (Ellison, 1997; Hines & Boyd-Franklin, 1996; Haight, 1998).

As it relates to African American couples, church involvement serves several psychological and social functions that are important in facilitating positive relationship functioning. One way the church does this is by providing families with opportunities for positive interaction with one another and with the community on a regular basis (Billingsley & Caldwell, 1991; Ellison, 1997; Taylor et al., 1999). Some of the other ways that the church serves to positively influence family members is by providing instrumental and emotional support, and empowerment. Other emotional benefits include enhanced self-esteem, and a greater sense of well-being (Billingsley & Caldwell, 1991; Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Ellison, 1997; Haight, 1998; Hill, 1998; 1999; Hines & Boyd-Franklin, 1996; Marks et al., 2006; Taylor et al., 1999).

Another strength of African American families is the importance of strong kinship bonds and extended family relationships (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Hill, 1998; 1999; Hines & Boyd-Franklin, 1996). This factor has been carried from traditional African life, and is grounded in a collectivistic philosophy in which emphasis is placed on the well-being of the group. Among African American families, these bonds are reflected in the importance of maintaining family and community cohesion. For example, it is not uncommon in African American families to provide providing day care for working parents or to informally adopt or rear children whose parents cannot care for them. The cohesion provided by strong kinship bonds is highly effective in providing extra emotional and economic support. Kinship bonds extend beyond blood relatives to include fictive kin. Fictive kin are individuals who are not related by blood, but provide as much support as relatives (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Hill, 1998; 1999; Staples and Johnson, 1993).

Stressors of African American Family Life

Racism is a system of power and privilege that is embedded in the structure of American society (Andersen & Hill Collins, 2007; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Feagin & McKinney, 2003). The influence of racism is evident not only in this country's history, but also on its legislation, policies, and practices. Racism is still a factor that is prevalent in American society, and it subsequently influences the experiences of African Americans (Andersen & Hill Collins, 2007; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Feagin & McKinney, 2003).

Franklin and Boyd-Franklin (2000) have explored the impact of racism in their clinical practice with African American men and women. They maintain that repeated experiences with racism or racial slights can lead to feelings of doubt about one's self worth. Furthermore, these encounters can cause a person to feel as if they are invisible and lead to feelings of disrespect and disregard. Family conflicts may be intensified as a result of experiences of discrimination and powerlessness. When individuals deal with instances of discrimination in the outside world, on the mezzo-level, this can have an impact on the micro-level by influencing dynamics with family or other intimate relationships (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Franklin & Boyd-Franklin, 2000; St. Jean & Feagin, 1998).

The damage of a racially hostile workplace does not end at the workplace door. Research has shown that racial discrimination can impact the physical and emotional health of individuals (Feagin & McKinney, 2003; Harrell, 2000). This is often manifested psychologically as depression or anxiety, which both impact physical well-being. Partners/individuals who encounter racism and discrimination in work or social settings may carry the feelings of anger and frustration home, and project these feelings toward one another. This can result in an

increase in relationship conflict and distress (Feagin & McKinney, 2003; Franklin & Boyd-Franklin, 2000; Harrell, 2000; Kelly & Floyd, 2001; St. Jean & Feagin, 1998; Taylor, 1992).

A study conducted by Taylor (1992) examined the extent to which marital satisfaction was impacted by internalized racism among African American couples. The researcher found that for husbands in the study, internalized racism did negatively impact levels of marital satisfaction, such that husbands reporting greater levels of internalized racism subsequently reported lower levels of marital satisfaction (Taylor, 1992). According to Boyd-Franklin (2003), experiences with racism can negatively impact the couples' use of constructive communication patterns, and lead to verbal aggression. The stressor of racism can lead to the occurrence of maladaptive coping strategies that can impact the couple's relationship (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Feagin & McKinney, 2003; Franklin & Boyd-Franklin, 2000; Kelly & Floyd, 2001; Taylor, 1992).

For example, if a husband encounters racism/discrimination in the workplace on a regular basis, this may cause him to feel inadequate. In an effort to protect her husband, the wife may hold back her power in the relationship so that her husband does not feel powerless at home as he does in his work environment (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Cowdery, Scarborough, Knudon-Martin, Seshardri, Lewis, & Mahoney, 2009; Franklin & Boyd-Franklin, 2000; LaTaillade, 2006). This is further problematic for the relationship because African American women often experience racism and sexism in society. The impact of both partners dealing with the strain of racism can have negative implications for the relationship. The emotional strain of these experiences can further impact family dynamics by leading to a loss of energy and motivation to participate in the day-to-day activities of family life (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Cowdery et al., 2009; Feagin & McKinney, 2003; Franklin & Boyd-Franklin, 2000; Kelly & Floyd, 2001; Taylor, 1992).

Current Factors Impacting Marriage Rates among African Americans

Several researchers have examined current trends in the family structure of African Americans, and have noted a decrease in marriage rates (Dixon, 2009; Kiecolt & Fossett, 1997; Pinderhughes, 2002; Staples & Johnson, 1993, Taylor, Tucker, Chatters, Jayakody, 1997). The consensus among these researchers is that the decline in rates of marriage among African Americans can be attributed to demographic factors and structural factors (Dixon, 2009; Kiecolt & Fossett., 1997; Pinderhughes, 2002; Staples & Johnson, 1993; Taylor et.al., 1997).

One of the factors contributing to the declining marriage rates is the imbalanced sex ratio between African American males and females. Specifically, there are a smaller number of marriageable men than there are marriageable women (Dixon, 2009; Kiecolt & Fossett, 1997; Pinderhughes, 2002, Staples & Johnson, 1993; Staples, 1999; Taylor et al., 1997). Several researchers attribute this disparity to several conditions, such as high rates of incarceration among African American males, and high rates of mortality among males due to gang activity and crime, as well as disease and poor healthcare (Dixon, 2009; Kiecolt & Fossett, 1997; Pinderhughes, 2002, Staples & Johnson, 1993; Staples, 1999; Taylor et al., 1997).

Socioeconomic conditions are also cited as factors influencing the rates of marriage among African Americans (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Dixon, 2003; Kiecolt & Fossett, 1997; Staples & Johnson, 1993; Staples, 1999; Taylor et al., 1997; 1999). For many couples, marriage is delayed until greater financial stability is achieved; this is especially true for males. This presents an issue for African American males who are often marginalized in the labor force, and regularly face chronic unemployment, sporadic employment, or are underemployed (Holzer, 2006; Lui et al., 2006; LaTaillade, 2006; Staples & Johnson, 1993). These employment conditions are influenced by factors such as globalization (Lui et al., 2006; Taylor et al., 1997; Wilson, 1996).

Specifically, there is a decrease in the skilled labor jobs, typically performed by African American males, due to the outsourcing of these jobs overseas. Researchers also note that stereotypical perceptions of African American men on the part of the employer can negatively impact employment opportunities for African American men (Broman, 1997; Dixon, 2009; Holzer, 2006; Staples & Johnson, 1993; Staples, 1999; Taylor & Sellers, 1997; Wilson, 1996).

Dixon (2009) discusses cultural shifts within mainstream American society that have attributed to the declining rates of marriage by shaping perceptions about marriage. She discusses factors such as the feminist movement which resulted in greater economic equality. This translated into greater financial independence for women, and ultimately meant that marriage was no longer the only option necessary to achieve financial stability and independence (Dixon, 2009; Staples & Johnson, 1993; Staples, 1999). Another reason cited by the author is the shift in attitudes toward cohabitation. Previously, it was not considered appropriate for a couple to live together if they were not married. Cohabitation is not longer deemed inappropriate but is now considered to be an acceptable choice for couples; some who may choose to raise a family together, but prefer not to marry (Dixon, 2009; Hunter, 2006; Staples & Johnson, 1993; Staples, 1999).

Current Research on African American Marital Relationships

The marriage rate of African Americans is 47%; this is in comparison to a marriage rate of 81% of Whites, 82% of Asian Americans, and 69% of Latinos (Bryant & Wickrama, 2005). This percentage is further impacted by the fact that the marriages of African American couples are more likely to end in divorce (Bryant & Wickrama, 2005; Orbuch, Veroff, Hassan, & Horrocks, 2002). Previous research has shown that the development and maintenance of close relationships, particularly romantic relationships, are associated with physical and emotional

well-being (Choi & Marks, 2008; Fincham & Beach, 1999; and Proulx, Helms, & Buehler, 2007). In light of the previously mentioned statistics, there is a need for research that explores the unique social circumstances experienced by African American couples that impact their marital quality. Unfortunately, there are few empirical studies that have examined married life among African Americans (Bryant & Wickrama, 2005; Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Demos, 1990; LaTaillade, 2006; Murry, 2000).

In a recent qualitative study, researchers explored the challenges of married life among African American couples (Marks, Nesteruk, Hopkins-Williams, Swanson, & Davis, 2006). One of the stressors reported by participants was stress in the workplace. This includes the strain of dealing with difficult co-workers and also managing job responsibilities. Participant's encounters with racism in the workplace were acknowledged as an underlying theme in stressful workplace experiences (Feagin, 2003; Franklin & Boyd-Franklin, 2000; Marks et al., 2006).

Another stressor reported by couples is "the time bind" or the strain of work and family balance. The "time bind" refers to balancing quality time with their families in addition to handling the demands of their work. Family issues are also a source of stress for African American couples. This stressor for many families includes experiencing the trauma of accidents, illness, and death within the immediate or extended family. Another family issue is the occurrence of financial emergencies. Though personal debt is a source of financial stress, most of the couples reported they have often become a primary source of assistance to family members and friends in need. These "knocks of need" can make it difficult for couples to get ahead financially (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Hines & Boyd-Franklin, 1996; Marks et al., 2006; Neighbors, 1997).

Haynes (2000) examined gender and family ideals among African Americans. Female respondents attached gender-specific roles to household activities and responsibilities. They expect men and women have a clear division of gender roles as it relates to household responsibilities and child rearing. Specifically, the male is the provider and the female is the nurturer. The women interviewed emphasized their preferences for men who were willing and able to be fathers and providers, though they expect to work in the paid labor force. The male respondents stated their preference for a wife who fits the traditional female role of nurturer. The men interviewed also believed that they should be the providers in their families; but they also understand and expect their wives will work. In terms of the division of household labor, both male and female respondents prefer egalitarian relationships. According to Haynes (2000), while the men and women interviewed stated their desire for egalitarian marriages, their ideologies and expectations about marital life are traditionalist (Haynes, 2000; LaTaillade, 2006; Taylor et al., 1999).

Several researchers maintain that among African American couples there is a preference for male financial leadership. This refers to the expectation of the husband/male to be the financial provider for the family, but as indicated in the previous study, this does not mean that the wife would not work (Blee & Tickameyer, 1991; Broman, 1997; Cowdery et al., 2009; Haynes, 2000; LaTaillade, 2006). One of the ways that the husband would be able to fulfill this would be to earn enough money to be able to provide the sort of lifestyle that the couple/family desires. Researchers have examined the impact of socioeconomic stressors on the relationships of African American couples, and found that if the husband/male partner has traditional attitudes about his role as the male provider but the wife/female partner has a higher occupational status, this can lead to conflict between spouses/partners. On the contrary, if the wife holds an

expectation of male financial leadership and the husband is unable to meet these expectations, this can also have a negative impact on the relationship leading to disappointment and conflict in the relationship (Blee & Tickameyer, 1991; Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Broman, 1997; Cowdery et.al., 2009; Haynes, 2000; LaTaillade, 2006).

Several researchers and practitioners have examined some of the issues that may impact the process of treatment (through counseling or therapy) in African American couple relationships. The stressor of racism can also influence the balance of power and relationship dynamics among African American couples. As previously noted, it is not uncommon for African American men to have challenges obtaining educational achievement, or financial and occupational stability, which are some of the traditional markers of masculinity. While rates of employment among African American women have increased over the last two decades, they have decreased slightly for African American men (Bryant & Wickrama, 2005; Holzer, 2006; Staples & Johnson 1993; Staples, 1999). The presence of racism in work environments may never dissipate. Therefore, it is crucial to equip couples with tools that will help them not only manage these stressors, but strengthen their relationship in the process (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Feagin & McKinney, 2003; LaTaillade, 2006; Marks et al., 2006).

Summary of Literature Review

This literature review contained three major sections: 1) *Prevention Science*; 2) *Influence of Culture in Educational Settings*; and 3) and the *Cultural Examination of African American Families*. The first section, *Prevention Science* contained two subheadings, an overview and brief history. This section was intended to provide a general orientation to the field of prevention science, first by describing the origins of the field, and then by describing the process of creating a preventive intervention. The end of the first section provided an overview of marriage

education, including history, as well as how marriage education is considered a type of preventive intervention. The second section of this review focused on culture and education was composed of sections on Influence of Culture in Educational Settings and Influence of Culture in Prevention Science. The purpose of this section was to highlight the importance of culture in two types of educational settings, the traditional classroom and in psychosocial programs. The third and final section focused on African American family life and African American married couples, by addressing the sociocultural factors that impact their lives. In line with the principles of culturally relevant pedagogy, sociocultural theory and constructivism, these factors that shape their lived experiences will subsequently impact the learning experience.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter is divided into three major parts. The first section is an introduction to the study, including the purpose and research questions. The second section is an overview of qualitative research, establishing the appropriateness of the method to the study. The third and final section, which is the most extensive part, addresses the design of the study, detailing the methods that will be used in the study, sample, data collection, data analysis, validity and reliability, and the reflexivity statement. This chapter concludes with a summary.

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 are:

- 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?

Overview of Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is inductive; analysis involves the identification of themes that emerge from the data. There are multiple sources of data collection used in qualitative research, such as interview, observation, and document analysis. The use of multiple sources provides a deeper understanding of the research issue (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998; Neuman, 2000).

Qualitative research is a method of inquiry that is used to gain understanding of human experiences and behavior (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). There are times when the use of quantitative measures and statistical analyses do not provide sufficient insight into the issue or concern, or simply fail to answer the research questions; this makes the characteristics of qualitative research a better fit. Researchers seek greater insight into an issue or phenomenon of interest, and must maintain flexibility in the design of the research as well as during data collection. Once data collection begins, there may be adjustment made to research questions or other key components. The qualitative approach provides a detailed understanding of the topic of interest that can only be gained by taking a context specific examination of the data: interviews, observations, and document analysis. For example, when interviews are used it provides participants with an opportunity to describe their perspective in their own voice. Qualitative researchers enter the field to collect data or to make observations in the natural settings of participants. This is important because it allows the investigator the opportunity to interact with or observe participants in their natural settings or to collect documents creating specificity about the phenomenon being studied (Merriam, 1998). The researcher is the primary instrument of data collection, so this information is filtered through the worldview of the researcher (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998; Neuman, 2000).

Design of the Study

The study conducted was a qualitative case study. The case study is a design in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple systems over time. Data is collected from multiple information sources, such as observations, interviews, document and reports. Yin (2003) defines a case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon

and context are not clearly evident” (p. 13). He also notes that in the case study, there are more variables of interest than data points, so data must be collected from multiple sources.

Additionally, the data must “converge in a triangulating fashion”. The case study design can be used to describe an intervention and the real-life context in which it occurred, making it appropriate for the proposed study.

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 is to promote stronger marriages among African American couples, through skills-based marriage education. The curriculum used in this program is the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP). The intervention curriculum was tailored to address the cultural experiences of African American couples, i.e., it was made culturally sensitive. More information will be provided about the history and structure of this program in Chapter 4.

Sample Selection

A purposive sample was used in this study. Purposive sampling is used when the researcher seeks information and insight that can only come from a highly specific source. The case is selected because it is “information rich” and is ideal for in-depth study (Merriam, 1998; Neuman, 2000). One of the reasons for selecting this African American Marriage Program was because a marriage education program designed specifically for African American couples is a rarity. As a researcher, I wanted to understand how the intervention was tailored to meet the needs of African American couples, and I also wanted to know how couples were successfully recruited in order to implement this intervention. This is especially relevant given the feelings of mistrust that researchers sometimes face when attempting to gain access/entry. My first step

toward gaining research access to this African American Marriage Program was to send a formal letter outlining the purpose of my study (see Appendix A). The response of the program director, via e-mail, is also included as Appendix B. The focus of the current study was the components of the intervention and the delivery methods most appropriate for African Americans. I conducted interviews with relevant program staff, including but not limited to: program director, staff member(s) in charge of recruitment and marketing, those who wrote and designed the curriculum, as well as some of the program facilitators. The consent form that was used is Appendix C, and the interview guide is also included (Appendix D).

Data Collection

There were three methods of data collection used in this study: interviews, document analysis, and observations. This section provides a brief description of each of these approaches as well as how they were implemented into my study.

Interviews

One of the most common methods of data collection in qualitative research is interviewing. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) describe the interview as a “purposeful conversation”. The purpose of the interview is to gather data related to a topic of interest of phenomena. Interviews can be structured, semi-structured, or informal. Structured interviews are more formal and employ the use of a specific set of questions previously determined. Researches conducting semi-structured interview employ greater flexibility. There may be some structured questions, but the interviewer leaves room to probe different topics, allowing the subject to shape the interview. The third type of interview is informal. In this type of interview, the researcher does not have a specific agenda other than to learn more about the topic/phenomenon of interest. This type of interview is mostly guided by the participant, with the researcher asking probing

questions as the interview goes along. Whatever the type of interview technique employed, the goal of the interview is to gain an understanding of the thoughts/idea/feelings of the participant (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003).

I utilized semi-structured interviews when conducting this study. There were some structured questions used to guide the interview, but there was flexibility during these interviews. I allowed my participants to share information they felt pertinent, and would probe by asking follow-up questions. The Program began their operation with a very small (salaried) staff of five; this was due to budgetary restrictions. For this study, I interviewed four of the five initial core staff members. The core staff did rely on additional support through volunteer assistance. As the intervention progressed, a few extra staff members were hired to assist with tasks such as data management.

Documents

Documents were also used as a data collection source. Yin (2003) notes that documents one of the strengths of documents is that they can be a useful way of confirming information from other sources (such as interviews). He also states that documents can be reviewed repeatedly, and contain exact details of an event. This leads to another benefit of document as data, the information provided through documents can be used to make inferences. The documents used in the current study included: recruitment and promotional materials, such as letters and brochures; any and all materials used in program delivery such as program curriculum and handouts. Field notes written during interviews and observation also served as documents (Creswell, 2007; Neuman, 2000; Yin, 2003).

Observation

A third strategy for data collection is the use of observation; an observation can be formal or casual. As it relates to the current study, an example of a formal observation would be conducted if sitting in on a staff meeting or facilitator training. This also includes observing a program session involving participants. Each of these would provide insight into the process of planning and implementing the intervention. While the program cycles had officially ended, I did have the opportunity to observe one program cycle that had been videotaped. The program cycle was comprised of the three Saturday sessions that make a complete program. This was beneficial because it allowed me to get a sense of how the facilitators actually conducted the programs. According to Yin (2003), observations are not only formal but also casual. A casual observation included attention to the set-up and organization of the program office. These factors can provide insight into the structure of the organization and other key dynamics relevant to program planning and delivery. Additionally, I was able to observe the video modules were used at throughout the curriculum.

Data Analysis

Once data collection and transcription were complete, I began the process of data analysis. To do this, I used the constant comparative method to analyze my data, which is often used in qualitative research. This strategy requires the researcher to constantly compare interview data with previous responses to find similar themes (Bogden & Biklan, 2007; Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998; Neuman, 2000; Yin, 2003). The interviews were examined along with the other sources of data, such as field notes from interviews and observations, as well as all documents I obtained from the Program staff members interviewed. These sources were constantly compared and categorized into themes that provide a clearer understanding of

the process of designing a culturally relevant marriage education program for African American couples. These themes are presented and discussed in Chapter 5.

Validity and Reliability

Validity and reliability are addressed through the attention the researcher devotes to the conceptualization and design of the study. The investigator's attention to validity and reliability is through detailing/outlining the system to be used to collect, analyze, and interpret the data. Validity means truthful, and refers to the trustworthiness of the data. It is important for qualitative researchers to ensure that they are correct in their understanding, measurement, and study of the issue(s) to be explored (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003). Validity does not only describe the importance of accurately capturing the variables of interest, but validity also addresses the degree to which the research findings are generalizable beyond the case currently being studied (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2005; Yin, 2003).

There are several ways that researchers can enhance the validity of their qualitative study; one way is through triangulation. Triangulation is when the investigator uses multiple methods (such as interviews, document analysis, and observation) and sources to collect data. The use of multiple data collection methods provides a thorough, more detailed understanding of the issue. Triangulation is also a way to confirm emerging findings (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998; Neuman, 2000). In this study, I used three methods to collect data: interviews, observation, and document analysis.

Another way of enhancing validity is through the use of member checking (or member validation). This is done once the researcher has collected and analyzed the data; and this analysis and interpretation is reviewed and confirmed by participants for accuracy and credibility. A qualitative study is member valid if participants understand the researcher's

description and analysis as a reflection of their perspective (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998; Neuman, 2000).

A third way to enhance the validity of a qualitative study is an acknowledgement of researcher bias. It is important for the researcher from the beginning of the study to explain personal beliefs and assumptions, experiences, and biases. These factors shape the worldview of the investigator, and subsequently influence the researcher's approach to the study (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998).

Reliability refers to dependability or consistency and deals with the extent to which research findings can be replicated. The objective, according to Yin (2003), is to ensure that investigators who follow the same procedures could conduct the same qualitative case study all over again. Not only would the researcher be able to conduct the same case study, but they should also obtain consistent results. The goal of reliability is to "minimize the errors and biases in a study" (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003).

Researchers can increase the reliability of a study by using multiple data collection and analysis methods. The use of a case study protocol is another way to increase reliability. The interview guide is one component of the protocol. The four major components of the case study protocol are: overview of the case study, data collection procedures, outline of the report, and the case study questions (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2003).

Researcher Bias and Assumptions

Positionality refers to the influence of factors such as race, gender, and class on the worldview of an individual (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). These factors shape not only the way an individual understands self, but also the world around them (Johnson-Bailey, 2004). The positionality of a researcher can also shape the research agenda. I am an African

American female, and my primary research interest is the design of culturally relevant preventive interventions. My clinical training as a marriage and family therapist has influenced my desire to conduct research about African American families. While I believe that therapy can be highly beneficial in addressing the developmental and relationship issues families face, I also believe that a preventive intervention is a way to reach a larger audience than individual, couples, or family therapy. My research agenda had been further shaped the research trends exploring various aspects of African American family life presented in refereed journals and textbooks. While there has been some improvement in the past few years, historically there was little or no information in the literature about the marital relationships of African American couples. As previously noted, most of the research conducted about marriage has often focused exclusively on White, middle-class couples. I am bothered when research (and subsequently the curriculum) uses the norms and behaviors of one group as the baseline for all; this is problematic because it bestows greater privilege on some while marginalizing others. Though this study is not designed to explore the marital relationships of Black couples, the examination of a marriage education program designed for African American couples is intended to acknowledge the presence this aspect of family life as normal instead of an anomaly.

When conducting qualitative research, the perspective of the researcher as an insider (emic perspective) or an outsider (etic perspective) can influence the process of data collection. Johnson-Bailey (2004) notes that the position of the researcher as an insider or and outsider is not static, there is movement between both. As it relates to my area of interest, I have both an insider and outsider perspective. As a trained marriage and family therapist, I have an understanding of the relevant theories and concepts that characterize, as well as knowledge of issues that shape and influence the marital dyad. I also have knowledge and experience as it

relates to the development and implementation of a community-based, psychosocial intervention; these factors provide an insider perspective. I have an outsider perspective because as someone who is currently single, I do not possess an experiential knowledge of married life. I have observed some of the dynamics associated with married life through my family and friends; and through my course of study I have an intellectual understanding of various facets of marital life. Neither of these factors, however, provides the same level of insight as the lived experience of marriage.

Chapter Summary

This chapter addressed three major sections related to the proposed study. The first section provided an introduction to the study, and detailed the purpose of the study and the research questions. Section two of this chapter was an overview of qualitative research, and established the appropriateness of the method to the study. The third and final section of the chapter addressed the design of the study, and detailed the methods that were used in the study including: sample selection, data collection, data analysis, validity and reliability, and the reflexivity statement.

CHAPTER 4

PROFILE OF AN AFRICAN AMERICAN MARRIAGE PROGRAM

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. This study covers the years that this grant-funded project ran from 2006 through 2009. The research questions that guided this study 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?

In this chapter I profile the African American Marriage Program (AAMP), a marriage enrichment program designed specifically for Black couples. I include a description of the program that includes the background, an overview of the format of the program, as well as other salient features. This chapter also includes profiles of the key members of AAMP staff, who were responsible for key program operations such as design, recruitment, and implementation.

An African American Marriage Program and Its Founders

This section provides an overview of an African American Marriage Program and its founders. It offers a glimpse into the steps that made the Program possible and covers specific elements such as the history of the program, steps involved in the delivery of the program, and an overview of the program and its curriculum. Please note, the name of the program and the

names of all persons mentioned are pseudonyms, and are used to protect the privacy and identity of everyone involved.

History of an African American Marriage Program

This African American Marriage Program is a research-based program developed at a Southern University. The idea for the program began with two faculty members, Dr. James Sands and Dr. Sharon Newman (both names are pseudonyms), who were seeking an opportunity to collaborate, specifically by doing work that would be community based. Not long after this conversation, one of the researchers, Dr. James Sands was attending a conference and had an important discussion with colleagues. They discussed the research agenda of prayer and forgiveness and how these factors influence marital relationships. When Dr. Sands returned to S.U, he shared this with Dr. Neuman. They made the decision to target their intervention toward African American married couples. Their belief was that the intervention would be most significant for this group, especially considering the bleak portrait of married life among African Americans. Specifically, African American marriages face significant challenges as compared to other groups. Researchers note that Black couples are less likely to marry, but among those who do marry they report that they are less likely to be satisfied and more likely to divorce.

The development of the Program began with an examination of the current marriage education program curriculum, with an eye on how to not only make it relevant to the African American community, but that it would also have a lasting impact. Marriage education programs are considered to be effective across groups, however, *access* to these types of interventions/programs is not equal. The decision was made that the program curriculum would follow the structure/format of the empirically supported treatment, The Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP). PREP was chose because it has been in existence

for over 30 years and is a well established and well respected curriculum. The study was funded by grants from the Templeton Foundation, The Administration for Children and Families, and the Fetzer Institute. Once program funding was in place, Drs. Sands and Neuman began taking the steps necessary to bring the Program to fruition; a key first step was hiring Dr. Stephanie Jones, to serve as Program Coordinator and Director.

Recruitment Strategies for an African American Marriage Program

In order to participate in this African American Marriage Program, couples had to be 21 years of age or older. Couples could be married or engaged; those who were married had to be legally married and living with their mates. Couples who were engaged needed to have a firm date planned to marry within the next 12 months. Those who agreed to participate also needed to be willing to pray and have someone else pray for them. The couples did not have to be of one specific faith; though the program materials are strongly Christian in their orientation; they could also be used with other religious orientations, specifically those who believe in the use of prayer as part of their faith.

An important course of action in the implementation of this program was the recruitment process. The recruitment process for the Program included a number of strategies from informal to more formal opportunities. Some of the informal recruitment strategies included word of mouth; and placement of Program posters and brochures in settings such as community centers, schools, libraries, restaurants, as well as barber shops and beauty salons. The Program staff also used the recruitment strategy of cold calling various churches throughout northeast Georgia and the metro Atlanta area.

The more formal methods of recruitment included having a booth or stand set up at large events in the Atlanta area such as For Sisters Only, the V103 bridal show, the international

convention of the Full Gospel fellowship, and the health fair of a large metro Atlanta church. A key recruitment event held in the Athens area was called An Evening of P.R.A.I.S.E. (Prayer, Recruitment, Advertisement, Information, Sponsorship, and Endorsement). This event was designed to be an opportunity to network and develop partnerships with area pastors. The event also provided the opportunity for pastors and church leaders to hear more about the program and ask questions.

Program Overview

This Program was formulated to explore three different approaches to marital enrichment, and subsequently determine which approach would be most effective. The purpose the Program was to examine the impact of prayer on marital relationships, and to determine the effectiveness of the educational program. The mission of the program was to “find the best ways for African American couples to keep their relationships strong and to reach the goals they have set for themselves.” One of the factors that made this intervention unique was that it is the first of its kind that combines a skill-based marital education program with prayer among African American couples. Couples who agreed to participate in the program were divided into one of three groups: a control group, the skill-based intervention, and the skill-based intervention plus intercessory prayer. Additionally, each couple who participated received monetary compensation, regardless of which group they were assigned to.

All couples who agreed to participate were required to complete four in-home interviews that were conducted by Program field interviewers. The first interview was a pre-assessment of the couples done before assignment to one of the groups, and the second was a post-assessment conducted after completion of the program. The remaining were follow-up interviews carried out six months and twelve months later. The control group (comprised of 100 couples) did not

participate in the program intervention, but were given the book *12 Hours to a Great Marriage: A Step-by-Step Guide for Making Love Last*. They also received materials and specific exercises they could complete at home at their own pace. The remaining participants, approximately 400 couples, attended three, facilitator-led programs. These participants were divided in half and one group (200 couples) completed the skill-based intervention program, and the third group completed the skill-based plus intercessory prayer intervention. More information about the differences between these curricula will be provided later.

In an effort to make the Program more marketable and to aid recruitment efforts, and the format was changed by carrying out the intervention over the course of three Saturdays. This was different from the one day conference format, but was condensed from the 15 week program format typically used in the PREP curriculum. The couples assigned to one of the two intervention groups were required to attend these Saturday sessions. Each began in the morning and lasted through the afternoon, and they occurred every other Saturday, so there was a week off between each of the three sessions. During the weeks that the couples did not meet, the facilitator would call and check in with the couple to see how they were doing and if they were putting their newly acquired skills to good use. The programs were held in venues that were familiar and easily accessible to participants, such as churches and community centers. Each of the sessions was co-facilitated by an African American man and woman who were both married. Even though co-facilitators had to be married, they did not have to be married to each other to lead a session together; though the majority of sessions were facilitated by a husband and wife team. During each of the Saturday sessions childcare was provided; participants were also offered a light breakfast, and lunch was catered as well.

Program Curriculum

As previously stated, the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) curriculum served as the framework for this marriage enrichment intervention.

This African American Marriage Program also incorporated materials from *From This Day Forward*, a one-day marriage enrichment conference created by the Seventh-day Adventist Church's Family Ministries, and *Fighting for Your Marriage*, a research-based, divorce prevention book that details strategies that are essential to maintain a strong marriage. The Program curriculum was designed to help African American couples strengthen their relationships and to reach the goals they have set for themselves. One of the ways of doing this was by teaching the couples the skills to improve their communication and effectively resolve conflict. The Program curriculum was also designed to show couples how to foster positive connections and maintain intimacy with one another. As noted earlier, the participants were assigned to the skill-based intervention or the skill-based intervention plus intercessory prayer. The session topics were different based on the group as noted in the charts below.

Table 1: Overview of Program Format

African American Marriage Program Format
Session 1: Welcome and The Joy of Oneness
Session 2: Communication
Session 3: Listening, Support, and Conflict Resolution
Session 4: Expectations and Hidden Issues
Session 5: Problem-Solving
Session 6: Developing a Prayerful Life in Your Marriage*
Session 7: Review
Session 8: Fun, Friendship, and Physical Oneness
Session 9: Continuing Prayerful Practices in Your Marriage*

*This denotes sessions that were included only in the Skills-Based + Intercessory Prayer Group

Table 1 highlights the main difference between the skills-based intervention and intercessory prayer (SBI + IP) versus the skills-based intervention (SBI) only. The SBI + IP curriculum included two additional session topics, *Developing a Prayerful Life in Your Marriage* and *Continuing Prayerful Practices in Your Marriage*. These sessions were devoted to the importance of prayer in marriage and as an important resource that is intended to strengthen and protect the marital relationship. Additionally, participants in the SBI+IP groups had a group in another state praying for them, though they were not aware of this. The SBI curriculum did not have the session topics devoted to prayer, nor were they being prayed for by the previously mentioned group. The video modules used in the SBI curriculum also did not include the prayers offered by a session moderator between each segment. The lecturers in these modules, did however, use Scripture references in their instruction which seemed to be grounded in the belief that marriage is a religious institution.

Many aspects of the Program's curriculum are identical to the standard curriculum used in marriage enrichment programs. Traditional marriage enrichment programs are designed to address areas that impede healthy communication and relationship cohesion. During each of the Program sessions, the format included DVD segments from the conference, *From This Day Forward* and *Fighting for Your Marriage*. The DVDs also included role plays related to the session topics. The facilitator led activities and the small group discussions were usually based on the materials presented in the DVD segments. For example, in Day 1 of the Program the discussion about positive communication within the relationship, and began with a description of the communication danger signs to be aware of in your relationship (escalation, invalidation, negative interpretation, and withdrawal). Participants were able to see each of these types role played by a couple. This led to the introduction of the Speaker-Listener Technique, as a

communication strategy that is effective in helping couples avoid the previously mentioned communication danger signs. After couples learned what is involved in this technique, they watched a role play of the a couple correctly using the Speaker-Listener Technique. The participants then had the opportunity to practice this technique while talking about a specific issue currently affecting their relationship.

This program was also modified to address areas specific to African American couples. In addition to the change in the format previously described, the program curriculum was shaped to include materials and activities that deal with the impact of racism and how this works against the success of African American marriages. The importance of spirituality and prayer is also an area of focus, and is acknowledged as an important cultural tradition among African American families. 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 specific ways that racism, as well as prayer and spirituality, were infused into program materials will be described in greater detail in Chapter 5.

Profile of Participants

This African American Marriage Program operated with a small salaried staff and several volunteers; this was due largely to budgetary restrictions. For this case study analysis of the Program, I had the opportunity to interview four key staff members who were actively involved with various aspects of program design, planning, and delivery. I interviewed the following Program staff members: the Primary Investigator, the Program Director/Coordinator, the Recruitment Specialist, and the Intervention Specialist.

Dr. James Sands

Dr. James Sands served as the Primary Investigator for the research study that provided the foundation of this African American Marriage Program. Dr. Sands is the Director of a Research Institute, as well as a Professor of Psychology at Southern University. His research has explored topics such as the impact of marital relationships on depression, and various aspects of marital behavior such as processes influencing marital satisfaction. Dr. Sands' research and intervention work has also involved several issues related to prevention and treatment of the types of marital issues previously mentioned. In his work as the Primary Investigator of the Program, Dr. Sands was largely responsible for writing the curriculum material that dealt with racism and its impact on African American marriages, as well as the materials that addressed spirituality and prayer. Dr. Sands worked closely with Dr. Jones in the various stages/components of the implementation of the Program.

Dr. Stephanie Jones

Dr. Stephanie Jones is the Director/Coordinator of the Program. Dr. Jones research interests have explored interpersonal trust and relationship behaviors. She was responsible for carrying out the numerous tasks necessary for implementing the Program. Dr. Jones not only hired the Program staff members, but worked with them in a supervisor capacity. There were many phases of this process that Dr. Jones managed such as focus groups, recruitment, all the logistics of running the program cycles, and the evaluation process. Dr. Jones noted that because of the small staff, everyone on the main Program staff was required to be cross-trained, meaning that each member of the staff was well-acquainted with the responsibilities of their co-workers, and could step in to perform their job tasks if necessary. As an African American female, Dr. Jones had an understanding of the cultural norms and values of African American families.

Ms. Nicole Graham

Ms. Graham has worked with this African American Marriage Program from the beginning, and was employed as the Intervention Specialist. As the intervention specialist, Nicole was involved in numerous aspects of program implementation. She was active in the recruitment process; this included contacting couples, churches, and other organizations in an effort to recruit participants. Nicole also orchestrated the session logistics for each of the program cycles. Some of the tasks involved in this process included: obtaining a program site, supervising the set-up of the weekly sessions, as well as handling the arrangements for childcare and catering. Additionally, Ms. Graham trained the Program facilitators, and she also served as a facilitator during one of the group cycles. Some of the promotional materials, and the curriculum material used in the course of the program were created by Nicole.

Ms. Michelle Smith

Ms. Smith, who joined the Program its first year, is the Recruitment Specialist. Her primary responsibility was to coordinate all recruitment efforts within the Athens community, as well as the targeted areas throughout Northeast Georgia and the metro Atlanta area. Though Michelle was mainly responsible for all aspects of recruitment, she worked closely with all aspects related to the planning and delivery of the program. As one of the core members of the Program staff, she worked closely with Dr. Jones and Nicole in the various preparation phases for each of the group cycles.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided an overview the African American Marriage Program to be examined in this study. This overview included: the history of the program, program recruitment strategies, an outline of the program structure, and a brief synopsis of the curriculum. This

chapter concluded with the profiles of the Program staff members interviewed for this study. In the next chapter, I report the findings of my study.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS

Marriage enrichment programs are a type of preventive intervention designed to address key areas that influence relationship stability and satisfaction. An important dimension of successful program design is an accurate understanding of the factors that impact couples' lived experiences. 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 that guided this study 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?

In this chapter I present the findings of my study. My analysis of the data collected has revealed four themes that capture the major/dominant/primary components of a culturally relevant marriage education/enrichment program designed for African American couples: (1) *Mirroring the Cultural/Lived Experiences of African Americans*, (2) *Honoring African and African American Based Patterns and Traditions*, (3) *Intergenerational Transmission of Knowledge*, and (4) *The Importance of Experiential Knowledge*. These themes, along with the sub-themes that emerged are outlined in Table 1. I elaborate on each theme and sub-theme in detail, which is supported by the data, to describe the common components of a marriage

enrichment program designed for African American couples. I conclude with a summary of the chapter.

Table 2

Data Display – 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 Upon 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	A. Mentorship of Male Participants
IV.	The Importance of Experiential Knowledge	

Mirroring the Cultural/Lived Experiences of African Americans

The first of the four emergent themes is *Mirroring the Cultural/Lived Experiences of African Americans*. There are three sub-themes associated with this theme: the Importance of Spirituality and Prayer, The Impact of Racism and Racial Discrimination upon Marital Relationships, and Dealing with Issues of Cultural Mistrust.

Importance of Spirituality and Prayer

The first sub-theme associated with *Mirroring the Cultural/Lived Experiences of African Americans* is the *Importance of Spirituality and Prayer*. The term spirituality will appear

regularly throughout this section. It should be noted, that spirituality refers to an internal belief in God (or a higher power). Prayer is the means by which a person establishes a connection to or relationship with God and it provides comfort and guidance. Each of the participants interviewed noted the importance of spirituality and prayer in the lives of African Americans, and as a result believed that it was important to include this element in the curriculum design. Dr. Stephanie Jones', comments below reflect the importance of prayer as a protective factor, and also as a skill that connects with other aspects of marriage enrichment programs.

. . . so what we are looking at a resource that is both familiar to couples but also very powerful in helping couples to calm down, refrain, and really move the locus of control. In a lot of arguments the underlying issue is who is in control, and couples end up trying to one up each other and talk over one another; that type of thing. So if you move the locus of control, you will find that you are really more open to negotiation with your partner; and feeling less like you're the one who has to solve this, or that it has to be your way as opposed to 'Let me be a vessel and let's work together and let this be in accordance with our faith beliefs, our higher spiritual beliefs.' A lot of times the only thing that they really can do is pray. So it's a resource that can be used when all seems lost, you feel down and out, or you just can't do anything else you can pray by yourself. That is something that is taught as a type of skill it can be used in collaboration with other skills that are part of a marriage enrichment program.

Dr. Sands, who designed/modified the curriculum, further describes the intended outcome of the inclusion of prayer in this marriage education program. He also addresses the importance of prayer as a cultural norm/value that impacts married life:

Our thoughts were of the sort of entry point that prayer could be and that it might influence forgiveness in powerful way. This would add to what we currently do as well as add to the kinds of things that are currently available in marital interventions. It would also be very culturally relevant for a pretty large group of people in this country, for whom prayer is natural, and prayer is regular; who see religious activities as an integral part of their lives and certainly as an integral part of their marriage.

Nicole's comments below echo Dr. Sand's statement about the importance of prayer as a cultural norm; and she describes how prayer and religion are important to African Americans. Nicole believes the program was beneficial because it linked something very valued in the African American community with a set of skills that had the potential to impact their relationships in such a positive manner. She also expresses what she believes is currently missing from the religious instruction provided in the church, that directly impacts couples and families.,

. . . but that shows you how important prayer is to the African American community, because what the Program did, there are marriage ministry groups in almost every church, and the churches are teaching African American couples what the word of God says, and what it says about marriage. But what is lacking in the church, and this is no fault to the church, but what is lacking are the skills, how to implement them; give me something that I can use on a day-to-day basis. Yes, you can use the Word,

and God gives clear instructions on if you have issues, if you have a problem with someone what you are supposed to do, you're supposed to go to them. But how do you communicate? Yes, I know I'm supposed to come to you, but what do I do once I get there? I don't know how to communicate, so what's the point of going to somebody if you don't know how to communicate?

My observation of each of the session modules that comprise the Program curriculum, revealed several features that highlight the importance of spirituality and prayer. As previously noted, participants in the skills-based intervention plus intercessory prayer group have a group of people in another state praying for them (though the participants are unaware of this). Additionally, before and after each of the DVD segments used in each of the sessions, a moderator takes the time to lead the group in prayer. Another way that the importance of spirituality is reflected is through the references to scripture used throughout the session modules. For example, at the beginning of Session 2, the topic is Communication, and the facilitators refer to a passage in Corinthians, which says, "Love does not keep score." Then, they led participants in a discussion about the common mistakes couples make when talking to each other.

Session Six is called "Developing a Prayerful Life in Your Marriage" and this session covers four main areas: the benefits of prayer, common mistakes made when praying for your spouse, common barriers to praying for your spouse, and the importance of making a commitment to pray for your spouse regularly. According to the session moderator, it is important to pray for your mate because it is an act of love, and it connects you to God's love.

The previous sessions addressed communication barriers and strategies for effectively listening to and communicating with your spouse, as well as ways to reconnect and maintain a sense of intimacy. The information about prayer detailed in this module is linked to the material discussed in previous sessions. One of the main benefits noted is that praying for your mate brings you into loving contact with God and strengthens your relationship with your mate. Some of the other key benefits of prayer are that it makes forgiveness easier and softens feelings of anger, resentment, and hurt or blame, and it will strengthen your listening skills.

The mistakes couples make when praying for their mates are examined along with how to avoid these mistakes. For example, one common mistake couples make is praying for God to change their mate. Participants were given a handout entitled, “Staying Away from the Blame Game” and the top of the sheet has a scripture reference, “Then let us no more criticize and blame and pass judgment on one another, but rather decide and endeavor never to put a stumbling block or an obstacle or a hindrance in the way of a brother” (Romans 14:13). The handout is used to further expand upon the true nature of blame, noting that when we blame others we are “actually passing judgment on that person and the role that they played”. Participants are then encouraged to look at and love their mates the way that God does, and to trust that their heart and motives are pure. Couples then break out into dyads to discuss the ways that blame has impacted their relationship.

During the weeks that the couples did not meet, the participants would receive a card in the mail. This card would have a scripture along with a special prayer for the husband and wife to pray for each other during the week. Two examples of sample prayers are provided. The prayer below is a request asking God to strengthen the connection between spouses, to help this mate to be a good listener, and asking for God’s guidance as one communicates with their

husband or wife. It touches on the positive communication skills couples learned about in previous sessions, this prayer also acknowledges the presence of God at work in their marriage and requests His continued guidance. The scripture on the card is, “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; know and it will be opened to you.” (Matthew 7: 7-8):

Dear Lord, please stay close to me as I talk to my mate. Help me pay attention to my mate and really hear what my mate is really trying to say. I know you are at work in our relationship. Even if I do not understand where it is all going sometimes, help me trust in your wisdom, love, and acceptance. When my mate and I are not listening to each other, please lead us back to understanding and accepting each other. I know that your love is the connection that makes me one with my mate. Thank you for your goodness and mercy. Amen.

This second prayer addresses anger and unforgiveness which are common barriers that prohibit one for praying for their spouse. In this prayer the petitioner openly acknowledges feelings of anger and hurt, which are not uncommon in marital relationships. There is no request to change one’s mate but rather the non-blaming approach of asking God for help in acceptance of one’s mate. The prayer opens with the following scripture, “Let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart.” (Galatians 6:9):

Dear Lord, when I am angry and feel alone, please help me to pray for my mate and to be honest in prayer. Please lead me to pray with my whole heart that your blessing will come to my mate. I know you understand and accept my mate; help me to do the same. I know that you live in my heart and you can heal my anger. Remind me that you are always with me.

Calm, soothe, and restore me. In your presence I am whole again. Please let me feel your love wash over me and cleanse me. As I think about your love, let me feel your strong protection and know that I can be healed.

Amen.

These are just two of the examples of the prayers on the cards participants received. The prayers were a way to encourage couples to continue to practice the skills they were learning in the intervention. They were also a way of reinforcing one's spiritual connection to God. They were also used to emphasize how the guidance and comfort provided by this internal relationship can positively impact the marital relationship; this is what the program planners intended for this aspect of the intervention to achieve.

Impact of Racism and Racial Discrimination upon Marital Relationships

The second sub-theme associated with *Mirroring the Cultural/Lived Experiences of African Americans* is the *Impact of Racism and Racial Discrimination upon Marital Relationships*. Racism and racial discrimination, though not unique to African Americans, do have an impact upon one's life and relationships. Dr. Sands acknowledged both the presence of racism, and he described the discussion among the program staff about how to incorporate this into the program curriculum:

. . . we talked about different approaches to working on racism, and the fundamental point was that racism in the United States is pervasive, and corrosive, and oftentimes under the radar of what people are thinking about. So it can affect things in the relationship and not be talked about, and never be addressed by the couple. So after we pondered and talked amongst ourselves for awhile; we came up with the idea that in a marital

program we might be able to address this [racism] as in the context of providing support. So we added a support module that was focused on the example of dealing with an incident of racism. We tried not to make it too extreme, so that it would be something that a lot of people would be able to identify with and recognize; it was more of a kind of racial insensitivity incident. It was an example of the husband talking about this incident and the wife providing support, with the focus primarily on listening and being there for the person and not trying to rush to advice. It's a nice example of a situation where that kind of solidarity could end up being a strengthening event for the relationship, whereas the alternative when it is handled less well is that it can actually end up being a wedge that pulls the couple apart and they don't even really know why. So that was the context that we thought we'd work on and then we had [a pastor] and his wife role play a scenario.

During our interview Nicole also addressed how the Program curriculum dealt with the presence and impact of racism in African American marital relationships. As a facilitator, Nicole had an understanding of how this discussion actually took place with participants and their response. She also elaborated on specific ways that encounters with racism or racial discrimination has an impact specifically on marital relationships:

. . . . one component of the curriculum was racism, how to deal with racism in your marriage. Well the Rev. Dr. John Smith, who was a pastor in Atlanta, and his wife did a role play about a Black man experiencing racism at work and how that followed him home. So the role play reflected how that

experience affected his marriage, as far as communication with his wife, and his attitude, and the pressure he was under. So in our group discussion, we asked the couples, 'well how does racism affect your marriage?' and it was interesting that, one mate would say it didn't, and one mate would say it did; or both spouses would say it did. For some couples, both spouses would say it didn't at all. Usually, the ones that were in agreement that racism did not affect their marriage, as they began to listen to the dialogue from the other couples and reflect on their own personal experience, they realized, 'well it does affect my marriage,' but because Black people have been taught, we know that racism is everywhere. So we deal with it; it's second nature. . . It's part of our everyday experience, so we don't think about how it affects our marriage. If you're experiencing institutional racism or even blatant racism out in your community or at work, when you come home you may not want to talk to your wife, maybe you don't want to go out, maybe you don't want to deal with the kids. If you have to deal with it on a consistent basis, you may even slip into a depression, you may get angry or violent, or turn to drugs and alcohol, because you are not able to talk about or deal with these encounters in a healthy way. So what we wanted our couples to be able to do is to be able to recognize those triggers and how they affected their marriage, and find a safe way to talk about that, and it was very powerful.

The topic for Session Three was "Listening, Support, and Conflict Resolution" and it was during this module that the impact of racism was discussed. The DVD segment began with a role play done by a husband (John) and wife (Alice), who were sitting at the kitchen table talking

about the day's events. John came home from work very upset about something that happened at work. John, who works at a department store, was having a conversation with a co-worker (a White male) whom he considered to be a friend. The co-worker stated to John that African Americans have solid and cohesive family lives. The colleague went on to say that this was the case only because Black people do not do anything when they are at work. John recognized this comment as a stereotype and was hurt and upset by these remarks.

John and Alice then act out two different scenarios showing how the couple can respond to each other in the face of this stressful occurrence. In the first scenario, Alice does not use the positive communication skills covered in previous sessions. She told John she did not understand his response, or lack of, in the situation with his co-worker. This only makes John angrier and their conversation escalates into an argument. In the second scenario, John comes home upset and discouraged and Alice uses active listening techniques while he is sharing the work incident with her. The couple never raises their voices at each other, and at the end of the conversation, John tells Alice how much better he felt after talking with her. The use of the active listening techniques affirmed his feelings of validation. After the role plays, the couple states there are two approaches to handling racism. The first approach is to become frustrated with each other, which can be harmful to the self as well as to the marriage. The second way they note couples can deal with racism in their marriage is to grow stronger by using active listening, showing unconditional love and being non-judgmental.

The discussion then shifts to address three main areas: the impact of racism, the impact of racism on marriage, and ways to protect your marriage from racism. An encounter with racism, whether in the workplace or in another setting, can affect a person's physical and mental/emotional health. This can translate to problems in the relationship such as misplaced

anger or frustration, or withdrawal from family life. The moderators assert that protecting your marriage against racism begins with remembering that racism is based on false assumptions. They also encouraged the use of the Speaker-Listener Technique when talking with your spouse about these situations. The guidelines for this active listening skill are outlined below.

Speaker-Listener Technique

Rules for the Speaker

1. Speak for yourself, don't mind read!
2. Keep statements brief. Don't go on and on.
3. Stop to let the listener paraphrase.

Rules for the Listener

1. Paraphrase what you hear.
2. Focus on the speaker's message. Don't rebut.

Rules for Both

1. The speaker has the floor.
2. Speaker keeps the floor while the listener paraphrases.
3. Share the floor.

In order to provide structure and to guide couples as they practiced this technique at home, each couple was given an ear-shaped sponge to be held by the listener, and a small square tile that represented the floor, to be held by the speaker. Printed on each couple's tile were the rules above for the Speaker-Listener Technique. This communication strategy that allows the mate who is angry or frustrated to express what they are feeling without feeling blamed or defensive. The spouse who is the listener focuses only on hearing what their mate is saying for the purpose of reflecting and validating. This takes away the pressure the listener often has to find a solution to fix what is wrong.

Dealing with Issues of Cultural Mistrust

The third sub-theme associated with *Mirroring the Cultural/Lived Experiences of African Americans* is *Dealing with Issues of Cultural Mistrust*. In my separate interviews with Program

staff members, there was an acknowledgement of the participants' initial reluctance to be a part of the research study and intervention. Here Dr. Jones describes the initial reaction to recruitment attempts, as well as the response of the Program staff to this resistance,

But the one thing that does come to mind for me is the use of the term research and this came out pretty strongly. . . . So the men in the focus groups told us, 'if you come out and you say that this program is about research there is no way in the world that we are signing up' . . . So you can imagine being in a focus group session and thinking, 'oh we're going to have to go back to the drawing board on a number of different fronts,' but I can understand their concern and again it goes back to some of the things we talked about before. There is still the legacy of the issues from Tuskegee and mistrust and concern about how would this research would be used. So you could say research, but you're going to have to be very forward in what it's being used for. So that really had a strong impact on how we pitched and presented the program from that point forward. That's not to say that we didn't talk about the research aspects of the program, but we did not put that out first. We talked about strengthening relationships, and we talked about the benefits of having a strong relationship. We also talked about the relationship education part of the program. Then it was kind of a transition to 'we're looking to learn more about these things and the way in which were going to do that is through the process of research.'

During this same interview, Dr. Sands expanded on the impact of this sense of cultural mistrust and specifically how it required Program staff to be aware of and sensitive to the distrust of researchers.

. . . It's a very important issue and it is related to this topic of cultural sensitivity. Particularly, one of the things that came up as we went forward with this project, is that there is a special cultural sensitivity to the issue of research and what it means to do research and to have research done on you. I think that one of the things that came out of this process was a really strong culturally sensitive model for presenting research . . .

The Program staff discussed additional strategies that were helpful as they dealt with feelings of mistrust. Michelle noted that personal community connections were very beneficial:

I think my position being that when we started the Program; I was married to a pastor and had connections with the church community and a lot of them I already relationships with, so I think that allowed me a little bit more freedom and leeway than the average person coming in that they did not know using the name Southern University. So I think my role in my personal life really played a key role in the Program being able to gain access to many of the churches and the venues that we targeted.

Nicole discussed specific ways that the Program staff was able gain the trust of potential participants, as well as how they were able to maintain this level of trust.

Well that's the main reason that we had to go to the churches because of the level of distrust that exists. Overcoming this distrust involved fostering

a relationship with the pastors of various churches; and as a result they would invite us into their church services, Sunday school, Bible study, and their marriage ministry meetings. Once we had the endorsement of the pastor, the people followed because they trusted their pastor, maybe they didn't trust us, but they trusted their pastor and that made a huge difference. That opened up a multitude of doors for us, but we still had some people who were hesitant, and would ask us 'what are you going to do with the research?' Now every person who participated in our program remained anonymous. This was one of the ways that we would ensure that followed through with every promise we made. We just kept letting them know that they were not going to be exposed or hurt in any way and we were consistent in what we said, what we told the couples was going to happen, actually happened. So there were no shocks, no midway changes, and no deceit. So that's how we overcame that.

The passage above addresses the importance of the Black church in gaining access to the African American community. One of the recruitment strategies that proved very beneficial was the decision to work closely with area pastors and church officials as a way to increase awareness about the Program. The Evening of PRAISE event was designed specifically for this purpose. This occasion was planned for pastors and church leaders, specifically to introduce them to the Program and address any questions or concerns they may have. Additionally, the event provided an opportunity for the Program staff to find out how they could partner with the pastors and get the word out into the communities.

The Program staff also created a document used during recruitment that was intended to address the general hesitancy about participating in a research program. This document, entitled “The Spirit of the Program” is a single page and is a combination of text and pictures. The heading on the front page states that the Program is based on two main beliefs. The first is that “African American couples are very interested in programs designed to improve their relationships. Surveys show that African American couples recognize the importance of marriage and want to do everything they can to build strong marriages that will benefit their families and communities.” The second stated belief is, “Marriage is founded on religious faith. By offering marriage enrichment from a religious viewpoint, we have the opportunity to reach many married couples and to help them bring faith into their marriages while learning the skills that will strengthen their relationships.” The second paragraph concludes with a statement acknowledging the importance of this African American Marriage Program in linking these important beliefs. The back page of this document highlights three specific areas: the benefits of strong marriages, the organizations that made this program possible, and the importance of the church in carrying out this task. This document does not explicitly state that this is a research program. It does, however, affirm the Program is “a partnership between the community and the University of Georgia . . . by drawing on the creative abilities of the community partners and the University’s researchers, together we can change the landscape of marriage.” The pictures on both sides of this document are of a combination of African American couples, as well as program staff members.

Honoring African and African American Based Patterns and Traditions

The second theme that emerged from the data is *Honoring African and African American Based Patterns and Traditions*. There are four sub-themes associated with this theme:

Conversational Patterns, Village Atmosphere; Community, Wisdom of the Elders, and Separating by Gender.

Types of Communication

The first sub-theme associated with *Honoring African and African American Based Patterns and Traditions* is *Types of Communication*. In the statement below, Nicole describes what she believes is special about one of the methods of communication shared by African Americans that contributed to a positive atmosphere in the Program:

. . . I feel that Black people communicate a lot in the non-verbal; I think that's something special about our people, something I love. I don't care where you go or where you live, I don't care what kind of accent you have, you're going to be able to communicate with your people and sometimes you don't have to say a word. I think it is the presence of that type of interaction that was one of the things that made the program so special. . . .

The group discussion format provided an opportunity for participants to process the information they were receiving, and to also talk about how to manage various relationship issues. The Program provided a forum for couples' to discuss issues that they may not have publicly addressed before. Nicole elaborates on this conversational pattern,

But also the group discussion was so important to the couples, because they wanted to talk. They didn't have an environment, a setting where they could talk openly about their concerns; and it wasn't that they just wanted to vent or gripe; they wanted to talk about their struggles and their issues. They also wanted to discuss what they were learning from the curriculum and ask questions, "Well how do I deal with this?" If we were talking

about problem-solving, they wanted that verbal interaction with the facilitator, that's what they wanted and that's what they benefited from.

The comments above touch on the various styles and patterns of communication characteristic of African Americans. These methods of communication may be verbal or non-verbal and encompass features such as sharing, eye contact, or body movement. Based on Nicole's comments, it seems that the diversity of these communication styles was not only present in the Program sessions; but they also enriched the couples' experiences as participant of this educational intervention.

Village Atmosphere

The second sub-theme associated with *Honoring African and African American Based Patterns and Traditions* is *Village Atmosphere*. The village atmosphere refers to the strong sense of community that is often cited as one of the strengths of African American families. This connection, or sense of community, is not restricted to family members but is also encompasses non-relatives. Here Dr. Sands describes the community connections that proved to be very beneficial during the early phases of the program:

So part of our work in the early stages involved creating some very strong connections with pastors in the community. Rev. Smith was somebody who was with us early on and was very involved in giving us feedback and commenting on the materials we were putting together. Rev. Michaels was another person that was very involved in this process, as well as Miss Franklin; she was another person that was very involved in these stages. We just felt very fortunate to have people like that who would look at the materials, comment on them, give us feedback, and also later on they

would serve as people in the community who could stand up and say, 'yes, I've looked at these materials and they're really okay. . .'

This reflects the importance of working together for the good of the community. These pastors and church leaders were not Program staff, but they worked closely with the staff members to ensure that this program would address the needs of African American couples. As a result of this affiliation, they were willing and able to endorse the intervention. A village atmosphere involves actively expressing interest in the well-being of others in the community. The village atmosphere was also present among Program staff members, and it impacted the level of their work as Michelle describes here:

. . . But we established a level of excellence in the Program all the way around; in every aspect of our work, and the participants noticed this. We were not just a staff that worked on a program; our Program Coordinator, Stephanie Jones instilled a sense of servant-leadership in our team meetings; that was something that she exemplified and that's something that we rose to. So we were servants we served the people that were in the program and the felt that, that we genuinely cared about them . . . It made a difference, we weren't closed off we cared about these people. And we let them know that you know that yes, we wanted them to participate, but more importantly, we wanted their marriages to get stronger.

Nicole expands on this sense of connection, or servant leadership, and specifically how it impacted the staff's intentions for the program and the manner in which they carried out the mission of the program:

. . . I think that just kind of transcended from the culture that we had here in the office because we really to operate here as a family, you know, this is our team and that's just how we work and we want them to not just experience the Program curriculum and learn the skills and learn the tools but know that when you may not even be thinking about the Program, the Program is thinking about you, so just being able to provide that and I think that's a part of us because we love to get together, we love to fellowship and things of that nature, so that in itself was positive.

This village atmosphere extended beyond the program staff to the participants, as noted below:

. . . but what was such a blessing is to see just how those families that were in that group connected. At the end of the third session, they almost didn't want to go home because, not only were they brought together to learn some skills, but now they were connected to people they may never have met otherwise. A lot of them learned that they didn't live too far from each other. You know, we're all in our totally different areas doing whatever, but at the end of the day, we still all have the same challenges to face.

The quotes in this section revealed the different ways that the village atmosphere was present in this African American Marriage Program. This belief was reflected in several ways, such as the willingness of community stakeholder to preview and offer feedback about the intervention; the staff's understanding of the purpose of their work; and the cohesion among the participants. The village atmosphere permeated many aspects of this marriage education program from the design and planning through implementation.

Wisdom of the Elders

The third sub-theme associated with *Honoring African and African American Based Patterns and Traditions* is *Wisdom of the Elders*. Each of the Program sessions/cycles was co-facilitated by a husband and wife team. This was positively received by my program participants, especially when the facilitators had been married for many years:

. . . especially when we're talking about facilitators that have been married 40 years, and it had a powerful and positive impact when they would tell the couples "we still have issues, these are things that we still have to communicate, or these are areas I still have to work on in my marriage." They may insert an example from their lives when teaching the curriculum about something hard that they had to overcome, and they are able to say they overcame it and are still together are more in love today, and you know for our couples to be able to see someone that looks like them in a marriage, and example of a marriage that has stood the test of time, that gives them a sense of hope that they can do that.

This excerpt reflects the respect granted to the elders, as well as the value that is given to their advice and counsel. The guidance of the elders, which in this case refer to couples who have been married for so many years, carries such weight due to the wisdom gained from their lived experience. They are viewed as pioneers or forerunners who are able to provide instruction to younger couples or couples who have not been married as long. This instruction can help them to avoid pitfalls and just let them know that they can weather the storms of married life and reach the forty year mark as well.

Intergenerational Transmission of Knowledge

The third theme to emerge from the data is *Intergenerational Transmission of Knowledge*. There were two sub-themes associated with this theme, Mentorship of Male Participants and Mentorship of Female Participants.

Mentorship of Male Participants

In an effort to meet the needs of participants, the Program staff adjusted delivery of the program and made the decision to separate husbands and wives during the intervention, as Dr. Jones notes here:

. . . . we changed the format of how the program was delivered. So initially, we followed traditional marriage programming in that couples were involved in the sessions together. What the men said to us was that many of them were missing stable consistent marriage models, and not to say that they didn't know anybody who was married; but they were not consistently involved with these men in a stable and reliable manner. The men said they did not want just any married man but 'somebody I can respect married man.' They wanted to us to include a place where 'we could have some time to fellowship one on one without our wives.' They wanted this because part of their battle involves wanting to be the head of household and wanting to be leaders to their families, and be respected in that role; but quite honestly not having a whole lot of answers sometimes when things get tough. Because not everyone has an uncle or an older brother and so they felt they could have that time to work out some things privately with our facilitator that would be beneficial. So we broke with

the tradition in marriage education programming to meet that cultural need. You know an experience that a lot of men are having based on things that are happening in African American families.

This change in program format detailed by Dr. Jones was the result of a focus group. The focus group was held with twelve African American males who were married or engaged to be married (if engaged they had to have a firm date set to marry). The purpose of the focus group was to obtain feedback on the ways to promote and encourage African American men to enroll and to remain engaged with the Program. The response of these focus group participants was that in order to make the program appealing to African American men it was important to recognize the experience of Black men. Specifically, the stresses of everyday responsibilities, as well as a lack of mentorship or positive husband/father role models. As a result, at the end of each session, the couples split into two groups, separated by gender, to talk about relevant issues. This separation of participants continued outside of the intervention sessions and continued during the largest break of the session, which Nicole notes was usually lunchtime:

. . . . during lunchtime the program continued and we would divide them, the men would eat together along with the male facilitator; the women would eat together with the female facilitator. Each time we had a different discussion point. The first what is the greatest truth and the biggest myth about marriage? The second discussion point was, how long have you been married and which year was the hardest year? And the last discussion point was just a re-cap of the program.

As previously mentioned, the program format was modified at the suggestion of the focus group participants. In addition to the lunchtime separation by gender, at the end of each session,

the couples split into two groups; one group for the male participants and one group for the female participants. This was done to accommodate the desire for the male participants to have a place where they could share their issues and concerns, as well as provide support for one another. An outgrowth of this change was the cohesion and subsequent mentorship among male participants, as described by Dr. Jones:

There was a sort of code between the men where it was understood by everyone involved that this was to be their time to talk, meaning everyone knew that you wouldn't go home and share with your wife what you talked about; and the men really seemed to gain a lot from these sessions. These conversations were really wonderful, but sometimes difficult to have. It was really nice to also see that the facilitator was not always the one doing the mentoring; but the men were really mentoring one another, and so I think that cross-mentorship really helped with the retention of the program. Though men are typically the most difficult to recruit, there were men who came solely because of these sessions. So men would say ' yes, I came to make her happy, but I also came because of the fellowship with the men.' As the program was ending you heard men saying, ' let's get together after this is over or let's get together to play cards or something,' so there was a desire to really keep that sense of support going.

This level of support came in many different ways; one of the most noticeable ways that the men supported one another was described by Dr. Jones:

So I thought one of the greatest things to come out of that was men at different phases of married life had the chance to hear about the struggles

that other men are having as husbands helps to normalize what they are feeling. Many times people have the expectation of being happy, and when they enter married life, they find out that there is happiness but it is also hard. And so to have men say to one another, 'I've been there; it is difficult sometimes; you are normal; hang in there!' And so you could really see the weight lifted off of some of the men.

As a facilitator, Nicole had first-hand experience with how this cross-mentorship of the men unfolded, and the impact it had upon the men. Here she describes specifically how the male participants benefited from their time together during Program sessions:

. . . . it provided a place for the men to really open up. A good number of the men had been raised in single parent, female-headed households that didn't have male role models; as a result, they were left to wing it and go at it on their own in their relationships. But within that group of men, they had other men that had the same struggles; that they could identify with and receive from. They didn't feel intimidated; they didn't feel judged in any way. One of the reasons they were able to be honest, because we adopted the Vegas idea, what happens in the Program, stays in the Program (laughter). But that was important because they had to know that it was a safe place. There were times that the men would weep during those lunch hour discussions. When we got our participant feedback forms, that was the number one thing they liked about the program, the time they had together with other men and the encouragement from other men to use the tools, to use the strategies, to implement the curriculum

into their relationships. You know one of the things that really helped the men was the way they would encourage each other. They would say to one another, 'well man if you do it then I'll do it Yes, you try it, I'll try It' and they would come back and report 'well how did it go? Well man I messed up' They were honest about it and they were really challenged to look at themselves, instead of being focused so much on what their wife was or wasn't doing but 'what is my part in this? Let me take responsibility.' This was true for the women as well, who would also say, 'let's not look just at the men', but would say to each other 'what's going on with you?'

The male participants' request to have a space separate from their wives and fiancées was a departure from the typical format of marriage education programs. This turned out to have a significant impact on the program experience for these men in a positive way that maybe even the Program staff did not anticipate. The excerpts above address mostly the experience of the men in the group and only briefly the women. This is not to say that the women did not have an equally positive experience. Women, however, are more likely to talk in community on a regular basis and frequently provide support in an unstructured setting or manner. The men, perhaps due to the nature of male socialization in American society, needed a structure setting to facilitate this interaction.

The Importance of Experiential Knowledge

The fourth theme to emerge from the data is *The Importance of Experiential Knowledge*, and this theme addressed the importance of the staff's experiential knowledge in order to carry out the program goals. Each member of the program staff brought different experiences and a set

of skills that were critical to the successful design and implementation of Program. The basic framework for the curriculum is based on the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP). This empirically supported treatment has been implemented in a variety of settings. Dr. Sands has worked extensively with interventions such as PREP, and was responsible for creating the program curriculum. Below he describes the challenge of maintaining the salient features of the curriculum while ensuring that it addresses the needs of the participants:

We had a large outline in the form of the PREP program which was empirically supported, and we thought would have good portability across different groups. We also had the idea about using prayer and had good reason to think that was going to be well received and seen as culturally relevant. At that point, the task was to figure out all the different things we could do to make this intervention culturally relevant from start to finish without losing the empirical foundation and without losing the basic structure of this research.

Dr. Jones, who is the Program Coordinator, was responsible for implementing this program, and she is neither a Georgia native nor a Southerner. Here she describes the importance of working with staff members who were native Athenians or native Georgians. These staff members had an awareness of local/regional norms and values that proved beneficial when carrying out the program:

I think the way in which the staff really in particular helped me, was not only about the comments and the feedback; it was also 'have you talked to this person or that person?' I think that was the beauty about having a team that was native to the Athens area or to northeast Georgia. I did not

have those kinds of connections and that level of you know community experience and background, so it really helped to forge some relationships; they really became key in launching the program and ensuring that this was going to be a good fit for the couples in the community.

The focus groups provided an opportunity for community leaders and stakeholders to preview the curriculum. Their feedback was integral to key aspects of program design, planning, and delivery. Below Dr. Sands provides an example about a specific instance where focus group participants had an issue with part of the program curriculum:

So the focus groups were wonderful and we had a number of people from the community who would come together and talk to us about the program; and one of the examples of the type of feedback they gave involved some language issues. There were some pretty striking examples where they said “you know this language is not right.” One of the instances that comes up all the time, is that in the marital literature when you see people writing about marriage they always talk about partners, partner this, partner that, talk to your partner and um when we were talking to people in the community they said that language is no good, that does not sound like a spouse or a marriage partner that sounds like a business associate, and the connotations are wrong and it just doesn’t come across well.

The successful implementation of the Program was not only based upon the effectiveness of the curriculum, but also important factors such as the setting where the program was held and the

environment within this setting. During our interview, Nicole, who was the intervention specialist, describes specific steps taken by the staff to ensure that the participants and their families were comfortable:

. . . . we carefully coordinated all aspects of the program, from the choice of facilitators even down to the site. We met in a lot of local churches; we met in community centers in their communities, the Boys and Girls Club; all of that was designed with our couples in mind. When I was handling the catering, I was always thinking about what our participants were going to eat and what are they not. This was not trying to stereotype, but really trying to think about what's going to make them most comfortable. This was from something like what food we would provide, to how we're caring for their children, and choosing childcare workers.

Nicole then described the dilemma the Program staff faced when selecting childcare workers who would be responsible for the participant's children while they were attending each of the sessions:

Initially, we were going to use workers from, the Children's Center daycare here on campus. Now when you're talking about this community, there is a great divide between the Southern University community and the African American community. This divide was one of the reasons why we had some trouble with recruitment. So when we told participants that we were going to use workers from the Children's Center and these people are trained, and it was a recognized research center, some participants

found that to be comforting, But you know some did not because nobody that worked at the Children's Center looked like them.

She then shared a story that reflects one of the reasons why something like the choice of childcare workers made the difference for these participants and their families.

. . . . one Saturday at one of our programs held in Atlanta; I was a working in the childcare facility and for lunch that day I served um hot wings.. So the staff and the kids were eating and I had a two-year-old whose mother had packed a lunch for the baby to eat, but the baby didn't want to eat that food, the baby wanted to eat my chicken bone. One of the workers, that was not Black and was young, didn't understand why the child was crying and what she wanted, but I knew what was going on. So I said, 'I'll be right back,' and I went into the lunch session where the baby's mother was, I said, 'ma'am, your child wants a chicken bone, just to suck on, and I said I don't know her that well (laughter), so she can't suck on mine but when you finish could you please bring yours back here for the baby'. . . . and that mother was fine, she brought it back, but she said, 'I hate that my child had to be the ghetto child, and I said no, she's not ghetto, it's what she wants and that's fine with me.' But you think about those things, even in childcare; these couples had to feel comfortable leaving their children with us, they had to.

The experiential knowledge of the Program staff was integral to various dimensions of this educational intervention in every stage from planning through delivery. In the planning stages this knowledge was essential for maintaining the most important features of the program

curriculum. The Program team also had experiential knowledge of the local culture, which was needed to gain access to participants for recruitment purposes. Once participants consented to be a part of the program, the members of the staff were responsible for ensuring that each couple felt welcome. As noted in the excerpts above, this required knowledge of cultural values, norms, and preferences.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I presented the four major themes that were constructed from my interviews with Program staff, as well as my analysis and observation of program documents and materials. The first theme is reflects the importance of an awareness of the cultural experiences impacting African American families. These factors influence the worldview of participants and as a result, must be incorporated into the curriculum of the program. This is also true of the remaining themes. These elements specifically impacted the way the program was delivered, and were important to ensuring that the intervention was well-received by the participants.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSION, AND IMPLICATIONS

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. This study covers the years that this grant-funded project ran from 2006 through 2009. The research questions that guided this study 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?

This final chapter includes three sections. I begin by introducing the two major conclusions derived from the study. The second section presents a discussion of the study, detailing its relationship and relevance to the literature that was examined in Chapter Two. The third and final section offers implications for research and practice.

Based on the results of my interviews with Program staff members, my observation of session materials, as well as an analysis of pertinent documents, two major conclusions were drawn: 1) Culturally relevant programs designed for African Americans should include and or reflect African American cultural values and lived experiences, and 2) The program delivery methods that were effective for the participants in the African American Marriage Program were techniques that were collaborative and undergirded with an understanding of the endemic nature and impact of race and racism. In this final chapter, I address these conclusions as they relate to

my research questions as well as the relevant literature. I conclude this chapter with implications for practice and recommendations for future research.

Grounded in Cultural Values and Lived Experiences

The main objective for conducting this case study analysis was to gain insight into the process of design and implementation of a marriage enrichment program created specifically for African American couples. The first conclusion addresses the first research question: What components of the marriage enrichment program, African American Marriage Program, are most appropriate and culturally relevant for participants? My first conclusion is that culturally relevant programs designed for African Americans should include and or reflect their African American cultural values and lived experiences. In this section the first conclusion is examined, specifically I look at how it relates to the major components from the literature review. These areas are discussed: prevention science; the influence of culture in educational settings; and the cultural examination of African American families. In addition, the findings of this study are examined to establish their relevance to the literature in the field of Adult Education Program Planning.

This study supports the literature's position that prevention science can be used effectively to change behaviors and to improve one's environment in an effort to maintain better health (Albee, 1996; Hage, Romano, Conyne, Kenny, Matthews, Schwartz, & Waldo, 2007; Mrazek & Haggerty, 1994). Specifically it was noted in this study that 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/characteristics 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. The key features of the program that reflects the cultural values and lived experiences of the participants are the curriculum additions of prayer/spirituality and the impact of racism.

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 and to help 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). In one of the role play scenarios, the husband shared the workplace incident with his wife, who responded to his story in a negative manner (she expressed disapproval at his response to the co-worker). This further angered the husband, and led to an argument between the husband and wife. 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.

A second major section of the literature review was the *Influence of Culture in Educational Settings*. The results of this study confirm what the literature says about culturally sensitive programs; specifically that program design should incorporate the issues that shape the worldview of participants. These factors should be incorporated into all aspects of program design as well as the implementation of the program. Resnicow, Soler, Braithwaite, Ahluwalia, and Butler (2000) expanded on the features of a culturally sensitive intervention, by addressing the dimensions of surface and deep structure.

The inclusion of surface elements used in an intervention is most often reflected in the program materials, such as brochures, pamphlets, and handouts. My examination of all relevant documents used in this marriage enrichment program revealed the planners/designers did incorporate these elements. For example, many of the promotional materials used in the program had photographs of African American couples. Each Program session incorporated different instructional methods, e.g., lecture, large and small group discussion, as well as DVD segments. The video segments were used in the intervention at different points; most of the people in the videos were African American, with only a few exceptions. For instance, one of the modules was an excerpt from “Fighting for Your Marriage,” and the narrator was an African American female, but the characters in each of the role plays, as well as commentators were Caucasian. All program facilitators were African American and were married. The majority of Program staff and the field volunteers were also African American. According to Resnicow et al. (2000) these surface materials are important because participants immediately recognize them, and they not only provide a sense of comfort, but can also establish credibility of the information source (Kreuter & Houghton, 2006; Resnicow, et al., 2000).

The deep structure elements of intervention design refer to the program features that should speak to the cultural aspects that impact a specific group (Kreuter & Houghton, 2006; Resnicow et al., 2000). My analysis of this marriage enrichment program reveals the infusion/inclusion of deep structure elements in the design of the program. One of the ways that the incorporation of deep surface elements are reflected, is through the addition of addition of the topics on praying for your mate and the impact of racism. The insertion of these features into what is largely a traditional marriage education curriculum reflects attentiveness to the values and experiences that are characteristic of African American family life. The decision to partner

with pastors and church and community leaders was also an important step. This indicates recognition of, and an effort to overcome the barrier of cultural mistrust, which could hinder the recruitment of participants.

The third major section of the literature review was *Cultural Examination of African American Families*. The results of this study support what research says about the experiences of African American families, in particular the strengths and stressors of African American family life. One of the strengths of family life addressed in the literature, and affirmed by this study includes the importance of religion/spirituality (Billingsley & Caldwell, 1991; Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Ellison, 1997; Haight, 1998; Hill, 1998; 1999; Hines & Boyd-Franklin, 1996).

One of the most obvious ways that spirituality and prayer were incorporated into the curriculum was through the addition of the session modules called, “Developing a Prayerful Life in Your Marriage, and “Continuing Prayerful Practices in Your Marriage”. The focus of the session, “Developing a Prayerful Life in Your Marriage”, was the importance of making prayer an integral part of the marital relationship. Specifically, participants learned about the benefits of prayer, barriers to praying for your mate, as well as common mistakes people make when praying for their husband/wife. As a means of reinforcing what participants learned, and to encourage them to pray for their mates, couples would regularly receive a prayer card in the mail. This card, no larger than a postcard, contained a verse of scripture and a prayer. Each of the prayers was a request for guidance in some aspect of the relationship, and asked God to strengthen the relationship, help the couple deal with anger, communicate with one another in a healthy way, or for help to openly show love to their mate. These prayer requests were linked to the skills the couples were learning about during the intervention sessions.

The incorporation of spirituality and prayer were also reflected in other aspects of the program curriculum. In each of the session modules, the facilitators would often incorporate references to God and scripture during their instruction, regardless of the topic. Additionally, before each of the video modules began, the narrator would lead the couples in prayer; he would also do this again at the end of each module. Though the Program cycles have officially ended, I had the opportunity to observe one of the three-day session cycles. In the session “Developing a Prayerful Life in Your Marriage” session, the group first watched the video segment; this was followed by a large group discussion. One of the facilitators led this discussion by elaborating on the main points about prayer from the video using personal examples from her marriage.

The inclusion of the prayer into the Program curriculum is a reflection of an important cultural value. A belief in the importance of religion is one of the strengths of the African American community (Billingsley & Caldwell, 1991; Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Ellison, 1997; Haight, 1998; Hill, 1998; 1999; Hines & Boyd-Franklin, 1996). Traditionally, religion has been a survival strategy and a source of comfort since slavery (Billingsley, 1992), and continues to be in the present-day society that is often experienced as oppressive/discriminatory among African Americans, as well as other people of color (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). In the face of these conditions, a relationship with God has served as a source of guidance and support (Marks, Nesteruk, Swanson, Garrison, Davis, 2005). In addition to the importance of religion, the institution of the church has been very influential in the lives of African Americans. The church has historically and present day, had a positive impact in the lives of African Americans. This organization not only attends to the spiritual needs of individuals and families, but has also had a positive impact socially, economically, and politically (Billingsley, 1992; Ellison, 1997; Haight, 1998; Hill, 1998; 1999; Jenkins, 2002;).

Another feature of this marriage enrichment program that reflects the lived experiences of African American participants is the creation of a session module about the impact of racism. This is supported by the literature that addresses the negative influence racism can have on the marital relationship. In particular, the stressor of racism can negatively impact the couples' use of constructive communication patterns and lead to verbal aggression (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Feagin & McKinney, 2003; Franklin & Boyd-Franklin, 2000; Kelly & Floyd, 2001; Taylor, 1992). This topic is addressed in the module, "Listening, Support, and Conflict Resolution". This session was designed to inform couples about positive communication strategies, specifically how to listen in difficult situations in a non-judgmental way which is key for problem-solving and making the relationship stronger.

As previously stated, the participants are view a videotaped scenario where an African American couple has to deal with an encounter with racism. Specifically, the husband has a workplace encounter and comes home very bothered by what happened; the scenarios reflect two different responses by the couple to this situation, one positive and one negative. This role play helps to review and reinforce the positive communication techniques the participants learned about in the previous week. The role play was also used to set the stage for a discussion about racism; mainly, the impact of racism (on health and well-being), the impact of racism on the marital relationship, and ways to protect your marriage from racism.

Effective Program Delivery Methods

The second conclusion of this study addresses the research question: What program delivery methods were most effective given the topic and the participant group? 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 (Alfred, 2002; 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).

This Marriage Program curriculum was closely patterned after the empirically supported PREP, but was tailored to reflect the cultural values and lived experiences of African Americans, as described in the previous section. Once the curriculum was in place, the intervention was ready to be implemented in the community, but this proved to be a challenging task. A distrust of researchers and mental health services (though this intervention is not therapy, it was initially perceived as such) were barriers to program participation. These feelings of mistrust are legitimate; and this was an issue encountered during recruitment efforts, according to Dr. Sands. During An Evening of P.R.A.I.S.E., a Program event for pastors and church leaders, one of the pastors acknowledged the presence of these feelings of cultural mistrust; specifically, he referred to the Tuskegee incident. He endorsed this marriage education program by separating it from the negative images of research projects that exist in the consciousness of African Americans, and referring to it as an example of collaborative research.

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; Dr. Sands initially wanted the program to be held as a one-day event, similar to a conference. The focus group participants objected to a day long conference format which they felt was too long. As a result, the program was offered over three Saturday mornings, each session separated by one week. These participants also 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. A third suggestion that came from the focus groups was to work with and within the Black churches as a way to get the information about the Program out to the community.

This suggestion led to a second focus group that was held with pastors and their wives, as well as other community leaders. The involvement of pastors was 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. Appendix E is a sample of one of the letters that a pastor, who endorsed the Program, sent to the married couples in his congregation. This letter reflected the pastor's belief that the Program is valuable to the couples, and that he supported their participation in the program:

“I find [the Program] to be a good program with the potential to greatly benefit you as a married couple, our church family and the community in which we live. I encourage you to embrace this program by taking part in it when you are contacted by our friends from [Family Partners].”

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.

Another feature of the Program that was important to effectively delivering the program was the sense of cohesion/connection 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, as Nicole stated, “. . . 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).

Adult Education Program Planning

This study examined the components of a marriage education program designed for African American couples. The results of my study support what the Adult Education literature says about providing culturally relevant educational programs. In their approach to program planning, Cervero and Wilson (2006) view planning as a process of negotiating interests among stakeholders. These stakeholders should be a part of planning the educational program because the historical and social factors that shape their worldview will impact the structure and outcome of the program. The staff of this African American Marriage Program was not alone at the planning table; they invited key community leaders as well as potential participants to be a part of the process.

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 religion) 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.

Implications and Recommendations for Future Research

The implications for this study are drawn from the study findings and the existing literature about Black families and the field of prevention science. This study which examined the components of a marriage education program designed for African American couples is a step toward what Bernal and Saez-Santiago (2006) note is the “articulation and documentation” of the influence of culture in interventions. While there is consensus among researchers that interventions should address important cultural dimensions of participants’ lives (Kumpfer, Alvarado, Smith, & Bellamy, 2002; Reese & Vera, 2007), there are few studies that elaborate on this process. As our society becomes more diverse, it is important for educators and practitioners to understand the impact of cultural values on program planning, and also be aware of the salient features of a culturally relevant preventive intervention. One of the practical implications of this study is that it highlights some of the important issues for educators and practitioners to consider when designing interventions for African American couples. A “one size fits all” attitude is not uncommon when it comes to the design of educational programs. There are certain features that are included in this program curriculum that would be useful for participants across the board, regardless of race or class, such as the active listening techniques. However, the techniques alone were not enough to make this program marketable or appealing to African American couples. This study adds to the existing body of program planning literature by detailing some of the important steps involved in the design and intervention of a culturally sensitive educational intervention.

There is a need for more research that is focused on relevant aspects of married life among African American couples. A disproportionate amount of the research on Black families has portrayed family life from a deficit perspective; substantive research about marital relationships is missing (Demos, 1990; McAdoo, 1997; Murry, 2000). Participants in this African American Marriage Program completed questionnaires and conducted interviews about key dimensions of their marital relationships. This information was not used for any part of the intervention, but it is a considerable amount of data that can begin to fill the previously mentioned gap in the literature. The data collected from the couples provides a solid data from a broad cross-section of African American couples. The couples who participated in the study represented different educational and socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as various occupations. This is exactly the kind of information that is needed to begin to supplement the scant body of literature that examines positive features of Black family life.

Concluding Remarks

As a trained marriage and family therapist, I was drawn to this program for several reasons. I knew that an educational intervention was a wonderful opportunity to reach a larger number of African American couples than would be likely to attend couples' therapy. I believed that this intervention would provide couples with information that would not only impact their marital relationships, but other areas of their lives. At one time, I was a facilitator for an educational intervention designed for families, specifically parent and their adolescents. There were usually several African American families who were participating in the groups. I remember one particular session when a mother told me that she did not think the intervention was designed for Black families (this family eventually stopped attending). This experience reinforced my belief that any program or intervention designed to impact family functioning

should be tailored to fit specific cultural values and preferences. The process of tailoring an intervention has been detailed earlier in this chapter, as well as in the previous chapter. This study has positively influenced my understanding of the phrase ‘culturally relevant program planning’ from several perspectives: as a therapist, a researcher, and an educator.

During my interviews with members of the Program staff, I heard several stories about the responses of participants to this program. It seems that many of the couples who completed this intervention were not shy about sharing the impact it made in their marriages. I would like to end by sharing one of these stories, shared by Nicole who was the Intervention Specialist and a Program Facilitator:

Day 3 is the Fun, Friendship, and Physical Oneness module and the couples had to do the Speaker-Listener Technique but they could only communicate with their hands, so they couldn’t communicate with words but, other than that it was set up the same way. You had a speaker and a listener, and the listener had to paraphrase what the speaker said, but only using non-verbal cues, only using touch. I remember one couple Mr. Frank and Miss Mary; I’ll never forget them. He was the speaker and so he was touching her hand and her arm and he was looking in her eyes, and I said “Now Miss Mary, what did Mr. Frank say?”, and she said, “He said he loved me”, and he jumped up and he said “She heard me! She heard me! She finally understood, she heard me!” Because it wasn’t his way to *say* it but he had been trying to *show* her, and the whole room was so excited. I mean he jumped up; and this is an older couple and he jumped up and said “She finally got it” and that was a huge breakthrough for them.

People want to know if there are any follow-up sessions. They didn't want the program to end. They wanted to keep going . . . some couples used this as their pre-marital counseling, and they talk about how it prepared them for marriage. Some couples said they wish they had gone through the Program before they got married. There were some couples who participated in this program; this was their second or third marriage and they told us how they wished that they had this information and these tools during their first marriages and maybe they would have survived.

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Appendix A

Program for Strong African American Marriages
ATTN: Dr. Stephanie Jones
Center for Family Research West
Southern University
Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Fifth Floor
Athens, GA 30602

Dear Dr. Jones,

I have so enjoyed the opportunity to work with the *African American Marriage Program* over these last semesters and would be appreciative if I could expand my involvement by using your program as the focus of my dissertation study.

I am writing to request access to your program for the purpose of data collection for my dissertation. My area of research interest is the design and implementation of culturally sensitive educational programs for families, especially interventions developed for African American families. Specifically, I am interested in the ways that program structure is tailored to meet the needs of African Americans; program structure refers to specific domains such as design, implementation, and evaluation. The research questions that I seek to answer are:

- 1) What are the common components of a culturally relevant program designed for African American couples?
- 2) What program delivery methods are most effective with programs designed for African American participants?

As I stated, I am familiar with the *African American Marriage Program* developed at the Center for Family Research here at this Southern University and consider myself very fortunate to have the opportunity to volunteer with the Program. This connection has enhanced my understanding of some of the steps in the process of implementing an educational program for African American couples and has cemented my desire to conduct a qualitative study using your program. To begin to answer my research questions, I would examine promotional and curriculum materials used in the program. I would also rely on the use of observation as well as interviews with program staff. My research questions would be submitted for your approval. The data collected would be made available to you. I would also like to continue to work with the program as a volunteer to help with data analysis or in any capacity needed. Thank you and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Patricia L. Erwin

Appendix B

Date: Fri 15 May 10:57:16 EDT 2009
From: "Tera R. Hurt" <terah@uga.edu>
Subject: Re: letter
To: perwin@uga.edu
Cc: srhbeach@uga.edu

Hi Tricia:

Good to see you yesterday as well!

Dr. Beach and I are supportive of your project with a few important caveats. If you agree to following, then we are happy to proceed with supporting your request with using ProSAAM as a case study for your dissertation research.

- 1) There is no new assessment of couples participating in ProSAAM.
- 2) There is no access requested to participant data generated to date.
- 3) There is an IRB approved protocol for interacting with staff or other individuals who are a focus of interest
- 4) Dr. Beach and I have a chance to review the proposal when it has been fleshed and before the project is implemented out to make sure that points 1-3 are in place.

Let us know your thoughts.

Tera

Appendix C Consent Form

I, _____, agree to participate in a research study titled, “Marriage Education for African American Couples” conducted by Patricia Erwin from the Department of Lifelong Education, Administration, and Policy at the University of Georgia (706-372-8509) under the direction of Dr. Juanita Johnson-Bailey, Department of Lifelong Education, Administration, and Policy, University of Georgia (542-6600). I understand that my participation is voluntary. I can refuse to participate or stop taking part at anytime without giving any reason, and without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. I can ask to have all information about me returned to me, removed from the research records or destroyed.

The purpose of this study is to examine the components of a marriage education program designed for African American couples, specifically the Program for Strong African American Marriages (ProSAAM). This is a qualitative case study, so the researcher will use document analysis, observation and interviews to answer the research questions. The investigator will examine ProSAAM promotional and curriculum materials, as well as conduct interviews with program staff members. If I agree to be a part of this study, I know that I will be interviewed concerning all relevant aspects of my work with ProSAAM. My participation in this study will require me to be interviewed one time. I also understand that it is possible that I may be contacted sometime after this interview to answer follow-up questions. My involvement in this study will be needed for no longer than three weeks.

There is no risk involved in participation in this study. As a program committed to the work of strengthening Black families, I am aware of how important my efforts are both for couples and their families. One of the benefits of this study is that, hopefully, the results of this study can be used to positively inform the practice of therapists, educators, and researchers who work with African American families.

No individually-identifiable information about, or provided by me during the research, will be shared with others without obtaining written permission. The only exception is if it is necessary to protect my welfare or if required by law. I will be assigned an alias that will be used in all data.

The investigator will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the course of the project. I may contact Patricia Erwin at (706)372-8509 perwin@uga.edu or Dr. Juanita Johnson-Bailey at (706)542-6600 or jjb@uga.edu. Thank you for your participation in this study.

I have read the above consent form and I understand that I am agreeing by my signature to take part in this research project.

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

Name of Researcher

Signature

Date

Please sign both copies, keep one and return one to the researcher.

Additional questions or problems regarding your rights as a research participant should be addressed to The Chairperson, Institutional Review Board, University of Georgia, 612 Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone (706)542-3199; E-mail: IRB@uga.edu

Appendix D
Interview Guide

1. Why did you decide to create a marriage education program designed specifically for African American couples?
2. What were your expectations for this program?
3. Describe and discuss the components of the program's curriculum.
4. How do you recruit participants?
5. Tell me about your experience as a program facilitator.
6. Describe your role as member of the Program staff.
7. What would you say have been some of the challenges the program has faced?
8. What would you say are some of the strengths of the program?
9. How do you evaluate the program?
9. What do you expect for the future of Program?

Appendix E

February 21, 2006

To the Married Couples of Baptist Church:

I am writing to recommend a program to you that is being conducted in partnership with our church. It is a program inspired by the word of God and designed for the married couples with at least one mate that is African American, and at least 21 years of age. The program is being conducted by [Southern University] and is called [the African American Marriage Program]. This program is focused on enhancing marital relationships by strengthening relationship skills. There is no cost to couples who participate in the study, and couples do not need to be experiencing any marital difficulties to participate. Please review the enclosed brochure for more information.

In the next few weeks, a member of the Program team will call you about your interest in participating in [the African American Marriage Program] and answer and questions you may have. If you are eligible for the program, I pray that you will consider participating. If you are not eligible please recommend it to your friends and neighbors who may be interested. In addition, I ask that you will join me in praying for the success of the Program.

I believe this is a good program that has the potential to benefit you as a married couple, our church family, and the community in which we live. I encourage you to embrace this program by taking part in it when you are contacted by our friends from [the African American Marriage Program].

Yours in Christ

Rev. Doe