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The Umoja Curriculum: Linking the African American Experience with Relationship Skills Building

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THE UMOJA CURRICULUM: LINKING THE AFRICAN AMERICAN
EXPERIENCE WITH RELATIONSHIP SKILLS BUILDING

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree Bachelor of Social Work with

Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By

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2014

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ABSTRACT

Literature on premarital counseling groups and five factors of the African American experience were researched to design a six-week premarital counseling group curriculum specifically for African American couples. The five researched factors of the African American experience were history, economics, education, structure of American society, and social life within the African American community. This program responds to the falling marriage rates within the African American community and the absence of services available to address the issue. The Umoja Curriculum was designed to equip participants of African descent with the skills necessary to build and sustain a healthy marriage utilizing psycho-educational workshops, psycho-drama activities, and African and African American cultural dynamics. Equipping African American adults with the skills to build and stabilize healthy marriages is a two-fold initiative. The immediate goal of this program is to teach and reinforce basic characteristics and overall importance of a healthy marriage. The end goal of this program is to increase the number of healthy households within the African American community in an effort to lower rates of poverty, inadequate education, and social deviance, thus rebuilding the family standard within the African American community. The overall impact has positive relevance for society as a whole.

Keywords: African American family, African American marriage, African centered, Premarital counseling, Healthy marriages, African American experience

Dedicated to

my mother
who motivated and inspired me to finish what I started,
regardless of what obstacles came my way

Simone, Ashton, JaMon, and all of my friends
who supported me throughout my thesis writing process

Jasmine Reid and Rashad Donaldson,
my role-model example of a young and healthy African American relationship.
May God bless and keep your beautiful family

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FIELDS OF STUDY

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Research has indicated that in America, ninety three percent of the population rates “having a happy marriage” as one of their most important objectives in life (Carroll & Doherty, p. 105, 2003). The same data set displays that seventy percent of Americans believe that marriage should only be ended under extreme circumstances. Despite these findings, for the past few decades, African American marriage rates have been on a steady decline. Today, fewer than half of all African American adult men and women are married; specifically, 44% and 37% respectively (Banks, 2011). C. M. West’s research reveals that African Americans are less likely to be married, and in turn, more likely to be impoverished, than their Caucasian counterparts (West, 2007). This information denotes that African Americans are not only less likely to be married than Caucasians, but are also less likely to be married than any other race or ethnic group represented in the United States of America (Bryant, Wickrama, Bolland, Bryant, Cutrona, Stanik, 2010). Such extreme discrepancies in data indicate that issues related to the downfall of the African American marriage rate are not being addressed beyond the publication of statistics.

According to Carroll and Doherty, “successful marriages promote mental, physical, and family health whereas conflicted and unstable marriages undermine well-being and incur large social and financial costs for communities” (Carroll & Doherty, p. 105, 2003). Research also reflects that those who are married and are the children of a

two-parent household are less likely to abuse alcohol and drugs (Antle, Sar, Christensen, Ellers, Barbee, van Zyl, 2013). On the topic of children, it was found that children are at a higher risk than others for mental health issues and poor performance in school when their parents are divorced or single (Antle, Sar, Christensen, Ellers, Barbee, van Zyl, 2013). With this being true, it is imperative that responsive action be taken in order to address the issue of the declining marriage rate within the African American community. In fact, “the Center for Disease Control has identified that ethnic minorities and low-income individuals experience better health in marriage” (Antle, Sar, Christensen, Ellers, Barbee, van Zyl, p. 343, 2013). Findings such as these are motivation behind responding to the critical state of African American marriage with a culturally relevant perspective.

Despite the number of sources that reference the statistical data, which exists concerning African American marriage rates, there are few that delve into a comprehensive study of the factors that affect these statistics. Concurrently, there is even less research on proposed or implemented efforts that have been or can be taken to address the root causes of these statistics. A group of scholars who analyzed a premarital training group agreed “relationship education studies have generally been conducted with white upper [socio-economic status] couples” which acknowledges the disparity in premarital research and training for African American couples (Owen, Quirk, Bergen, Inch, France, p. 296, 2012). Consequently, the number of African Americans getting married continues to dwindle, while the issues within the African American community continue to rise. “If generic risk factors, like marital distress and instability, can be altered in a population, then this can have a positive influence on a wide range of health, social, and correctional services” (Carroll & Doherty, p. 107, 2003).

The Umoja Curriculum responds to the statistics of failing and absent African American married households by addressing key techniques for successful relationships that utilize culturally relevant dynamics. Its unique design is built to equip African American families with skills and resources to rebuild the African American community from within the home. Thus, this program indirectly decreases rates of poverty, inadequate education, and social deviance in the African American Community and increases the positive impact that the African American family has on American society.

Initial interest in the study of the African American family was sparked when the researcher was in high school on a day that the topic of discussion was marriage and family statistics in the United States. The number of African Americans who were not currently married, or were previously married and currently divorced, was baffling. The notion that African Americans were incapable of obtaining and sustaining stable matrimonial relationships was immediately dismissed, yet thoughts of the factors supporting these statistics still lingered. It was this initial encounter that generated the original idea for research on the African American family independent of material pertaining to other races and ethnicities within the United States. When the African American marriage rate became the topic of discussion again, this time in higher education and in more detail, it was obvious that a response to the discrepancy between marriage rates of African Americans and all other races was necessary. Because the issue of failing and non-existent marriages existed within the African American community, it made sense to study the African American experience independent of others. However, after research and finding no prior solutions that addressed the issue, the decision to create one was made.

Due to the scarcity of marital relationship role-models in the African American community, the creator of The Umoja Curriculum decided to supplement the shortage of personal wisdom with skills and tools specifically designed for those who identify as members of the African American community. As an African American young adult, the creator of this program attests to the affects of the few and far between examples of healthy, African American relationships in her life. In her words, so few examples of such relationships and the lack of access to information on relationship skills make it hard for her generation to break the cycle of dysfunctional relationships. As a senior Social Work student, the researcher's interest in African American marriage also develops from the opportunity to combine personal passion with professional research. The need for skills necessary to sustain a healthy relationship in the African American community is dire and one way to begin to address the issue of African American marriage rates is with programs such as the Umoja Curriculum.

Scholars Anderson and Stewart contend that conflict that occurs in the family, as well as socially deviant behavior, develop from "culturally specific behavioral patterns" (Anderson & Stewart, p. 120, 2007). Anderson and Stewart also agree that although life experiences may be the same, "the effects of racism, discrimination, and political and economic dominance are not felt or reacted to similarly" between African Americans and White Americans, thus supporting the concept of the independent study of the African American family over cross-cultural analysis (Anderson & Stewart, p. 120, 2007). In other words, because of their unique history of being a group of people who migrated to America by force, African Americans face a set of issues that are unique to their population, and are therefore worthy of study independent from those of any other ethnic

group. To support this statement, researchers agree, “racial and cultural factors as well as the socio-political environment in the United States can influence the formations and structure of relationships” (Owen, Quirk, Bergen, Inch, France, p. 297, 2012). Rutledge Dennis, who proposed the Strong Family Theory, as well as Weak Family theory, suggests that the African American family should be “evaluated within its own context of social reality” (Anderson & Stewart, p. 109, 2007). In other words, research of the African American experience independent of other races is supported by peer-reviewed literature, thus deeming a premarital training program specifically designed for African Americans arguably appropriate.

In order to design a curriculum that addressed root causes related to the low marriage rate among African Americans, five factors of the African American experience that affect the wellbeing of marital relationships and literature on existing premarital counseling group programs were examined. The five factors that were researched are history, economics, education, structure of American society, and social life within the African American population. The historical factor of the African American experience focuses on the time period from when Africans were brought to America for the institution of slavery until emancipation. The economic factor comments on the monetary hardships that African American couples experience and relationship conflicts that financial hardships present. The educational factor refers to the outcomes of the lack of African American males pursuing higher education degrees and the influx of African American females who hold higher education degrees. The structure of American society in this paper refers to the institutional discrimination against African Americans, and social life within the African American community refers to how African Americans

themselves are contributing to the downfall of the marriage rate. All of these factors create a tapestry, which is the African American experience, and is better suited for comprehensive analysis for the creation of a premarital counseling group for African Americans.

The information collected from existing and past premarital counseling groups pertained to content, evaluation methods, and relevance to the African American Community. These points were targeted in data collection to ensure that the content of The Umoja Curriculum qualified as beneficial to sustain a healthy relationship. With all of the above, The Umoja Curriculum is considered by its creator to be a proactive intervention that addresses the issue of falling African American marriage rates. With this, the negative issues that have emerged from the African American home will decrease over time and strengthen the African American community as a whole.

The Umoja Curriculum is a six session, culturally relevant, interactive, psycho-drama and psycho-educational premarital counseling group specifically designed for African American couples. Sessions include fellowship, psycho-educational information pulled directly from research of the five factors of the African American experience mentioned above, and psycho-drama segments that are designed to engage clients and reinforce the topic of that session. The Umoja Curriculum is culturally relevant in the sense that it utilizes traditional African and African American words and dynamics in place of Eurocentric titles and activities. For example, the word ‘umoja’ in the title is a Swahili word that means unity. The significance of a culturally relevant design is not only to capture the attention of African American couples, but to also focus on the factors that are unique to the African American experience.

Realization of the interconnected network of systemic factors of the African American experience and premarital counseling skills is the vital element in analyzing the information and utilizing it in such a way that benefits the African American community. This holistic perspective is the foundation for rebuilding the structure of African American home life, the nucleus of the African American community. Chambers and Kravitz agree that the issue [of African American marriage] demands a “culturally sensitive, contextual analysis” (Chambers & Kravitz, 2011, p. 648). In other words, today, a holistic approach that is culturally relevant to the African American community is the only reliable method to analyze and utilize gathered information in a way that is cohesive and therefore beneficial towards the redefinition of the African American home and community.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Historical Factors

Upon their forced arrival to America, and often times before they departed the continent of Africa, African families were separated and sold away from each other by the Europeans as a means to break the foundation and collective spirit of the captured people. On the slave ships, while men and boys were always shackled and chained below the ship's deck, it was not uncommon for women and girls to have the "privilege" of being on the deck (Anderson & Stewart, 2007). This was an obvious attempt to not only disrupt the African family structure through the creation of tension between men and women, but also to begin the process of emasculation of the African male. After this experience, the African family experienced further turmoil through being sold away from one another to different plantations across the antebellum south. To further sever the African family, native languages and cultural rituals were also stripped from slaves.

Not easily broken, many attempted to marry and build families in secret on plantations. In fact, years after emancipation, "enduring two-parent relationships and households formed during slavery were recorded and reported among former enslaved Africans" (Anderson & Stewart, p.109, 2007). Despite their efforts, many of these couples were discovered and males were either separated from their mates and children on the plantation property, or were sold to another slave owner (Anderson & Stewart,

2007). In other, more severe cases, seeing that African marriages were considered to be illegal, many a slave who dared to begin a family was sought out, beaten, or killed (Lawson & Thompson, 1995). Along with this, slave children with slave fathers were not allowed to have their father's last name, but rather their slave masters last name, in conjunction with the popular tradition of selling him off to another plantation, virtually eliminating the African male from his family for the duration of the institution of slavery (Pinderhughes, 2002). This too continued the emasculation of the African male. Ironically, though "African traditional family customs were forcibly eroded or modified to conform to the concepts of Christianity", commitment to marriage was heavily preached on by White, southern ministers. Because of this, many "were faced with dilemma" when slave masters took sexual liberties with slave women and when married slaves were separated and sold away from each other (Anderson & Stewart, p. 109, 2007).

The significance of the history of the African family is that it the foundation of the African American experience today and the current state of the African American Family reflects it. Daniel P. Moynihan, sociologist and former U.S. Senator, is quoted saying that "slavery had destroyed the quality of African American family life and left it in 'a tangle of pathology', which in consequence impede the progress of Black Americans" (Anderson & Stewart, p. 109, 2007). The same source also states "there is no doubt that European influence and domination have diminished the influence of traditional African family values and practices in the lives of Black Americans" (Anderson & Stewart, p. 108, 2007).

Economic and Educational Factors

One fact to explain why African American couples are not getting married is because the economic need for women to marry no longer exists. Researchers Chambers and Kravitz state, “African American women...do not have a sense of urgency to marry the men they are in a committed relationship with because they are economically self-sufficient” (Chambers & Kravitz, 2011). This unusual phenomenon is to be considered as such because in a society where all women on average make less than men, African American women are making more than African American men. One explanation for this phenomenon is that there are more public assistance opportunities for single mothers than there are for single fathers. Though the creator of The Umoja Curriculum found no research on the impact of public assistance for African American single mothers specifically, the fact still exists that there are more opportunities for single mothers to receive assistance than there are for their male counterparts.

Another explanation supporting the absence of the financial need for African American women to get married pertains to the differing levels of education between African American men and women. Today, statistics show that African American women are now getting more and higher level degrees than African American men. Because of this disparity, some Black women are now expecting to marry a less educated husband as reported by Richard Banks, author of *Is Marriage for White People?* (Banks, 2011). In fact, there is research to support the claim that it is more so educational differences that impact a woman’s satisfaction in a relationship than economic differences (Chambers & Kravitz, 2011).

However, financial disparity is not the only phenomenon that is a result of African America women excelling in academia. A husband with less education than his wife may

feel uncomfortable in a social setting with his wife's friends or coworkers, which inevitably places strain on their relationship (Chambers & Kravitz, 2011). Secondly, in a home where the wife is more educated than her husband, the individual approaches to issues within their marriage and their home life will differ, statistically, based upon their level of education or lack thereof (Chambers & Kravitz, 2011).

Because African American men are making less money than women, many have chosen to work more than one job, which takes away from quality time that could be spent with their partner or loved ones. The divorced African American men who were interviewed for the Lawson & Thompson study said that it was impossible to spend quality time with their families and support their household simultaneously. The men stated that amongst other reasons, heavy layoffs, lower pay than their white counterparts, and having trouble trying to find employment as well, working multiple jobs was the only way they felt that they could support their family (Lawson & Thompson, 1995).

Anderson and Stewart agree that African American men can not be expected to support their families as head of household because they are excluded from economic opportunities (Anderson & Stewart, 2007). Sadly, what these men tried to do to save their families was the very thing that tore them apart: work. Another explanation for how African American women are more educated and paid more than African American males is the rate at which African American males are going to jail and being murdered, which in the long run affects the gender ratio within the African American Community. This topic is elaborated on later in this work in factors of the structure of American Society.

Lack of control over job stability promotes relationship distress and degree from a higher education institution still does not protect African American men from the high unemployment rates that plague the African American community. “Economic marginalization and low educational achievement have been directly linked” to the discouragement of African American men’s decision to marry (Chambers & Kravitz, 2011, p. 651). Statistically, 1 out of every 3 African American men will be unemployed in any given year regardless of their education level (Lawson & Thompson, 1995). Statistics from the US Census Bureau illustrate the relationship between increasing unemployment rates and increasing divorce rates within the African American community (Bryant, Wickrama, Bolland, Bryant, Cutrona, Stanik, 2010). Because African American couples of a higher socioeconomic status have a higher rate of successful marriages, the creator of The Umoja Curriculum found it imperative to include this research in the program (Anderson & Stewart, 2007).

Factors of the Structure of American Society

Though African Americans have made significant advancements in all factors contributing to the African American experience since the arrival of Africans for the institution of slavery, the African American family continues to experience hindrance in growth from the structure of American society and culture. Weak-family theory of Rutledge Dennis, who also is the creator of strong-family theory, argues that though slavery did weaken the African American family, it continues to be weak due to the social, political, economic, and psychological effects of persistent racism (Anderson & Stewart, 2007). Simultaneously, the idea of strong-family theory must be recognized to

acknowledge the “survivability and adaptability” of the African American family as well (Anderson & Stewart, 2007). The structure of American society and culture refers to obstacles that exist, such as institutional discrimination, which negatively affects the African American family. The following quote from Anderson and Stewart (2007) properly depicts what the creator of The Umoja Curriculum agrees is an accurate definition of institutional discrimination:

“The African American family has been irreparably weakened and remains unstable because of historic and chronic racism and discrimination” (p. 109).

“Stewart and Scott maintain that institutional discrimination “leads to the temporary and permanent removal of Black males from the civilian population through the operation of labor market mechanisms, the educational system, the health care delivery system, the public assistance complex, the subliminal institutions of crime and vice, the penal correction system, and the military” (p.113).

Scholars have stated that “the disparity in the ratio of men to women [is] a possible explanation for the low marriage rate among [African Americans]” (Chambers & Kravitz, 2011, p. 651). This simply means that there are more African American women than there are African American men, causing what is called a gender ratio imbalance within the African American community. In fact, research has indicated that relatively balanced gender ratios benefit the stability of a community, and one of the first to recognize the importance of balanced gender ratio was W.E.B. Dubois (Anderson & Stewart, 2007).

Though not solely the reasoning behind the current gender ratio imbalance within the African American community, one explanation is that there are more African American males in prison than any other race represented in the United States. One of many events that have contributed to many African American men behind bars was the War on Drugs that occurred between 1983 and 1993. During this time, there was a five hundred and ten percent increase in drug arrests where at least eighty percent of those arrests resulted in the incarceration of African American males (Browning, Miller & Spruance, 2003). As a result of this and other factors, today, fifty percent of all males currently in prison are African American.

Because women do not typically seek relationships with males who are incarcerated and, the gender ratio imbalance is affected and the number of marriageable African American men continues to sink. In the long run, these statistics create a dilemma for African American women who want to marry African American men (Pinderhuges, 2002). Unfortunately, this is the dilemma for many African American women. In his journey to complete his book, Banks found that African American women were least likely to “marry-out”, or marry outside of their race than any other group in the United States (Banks, 2011).

Gang activity, drug and alcohol abuse, and poor health care are also factors that fall under the structure of society that contribute to the decline in African American marriages (Pinderhuges, 2002). Though initially placed in the social life factors of the African American experience, gang activity, substance abuse, and poor health care are all considered in the structural section of this work because any one of these instances occur as a result of environment, not race. Though race is a factor, one’s environment is

determined by socio-economic status, level of education, and access to opportunity and resources. In congruence with African American males involved with gangs, drug and alcohol abuse, and poor access to health care, the number one reason many African American men are not getting married is because they fall victim to homicide.

Homicide is the leading cause of death in African American males ages fifteen to thirty four (Williams, 1998). Williams concludes that although violence is not condoned, it should be expected due to the way African American men are treated in society (Williams, 1998). Having said this, according to Williams, “an oppressive social environment encourages violence” (Williams, 1998). This factor could easily fall into the social section of the paper as well, but it also fits here because it pertains to the environment.

However, both societal structure and social factors can be taken into consideration when analyzing and addressing the issue of violence within the African American Community. In order to improve the marriage rates as well as the African American community in general, Pinderhuges claims that African Americans “must change self crippling responses to the societal predicaments” of which they are apart (Pinderhuges, 2002). In other words, the social approach examines which factors inside of the African American community perpetuate the decline of the African American family.

Social Life Factors

A growing social issue among African American men is infidelity, a main contributor to African American divorces and dysfunctional relationships (Pinderhuges, 2002). Banks researched African American males are dating more than one woman

simultaneously simply because they can due to the ratio indifference between women and men in the African American community (Banks, 2011). Not only is this behavior weakening to potential engagement-ready relationships, but it is also hurting African American women, emotionally and physically. Because African American men are more likely to have simultaneous intimate partners, African American women, in turn, are at the highest risk of contracting an STI or HIV (Gentry, 2007). “The male shortage in the African American population has been a major contributor to marital decline, adultery, out-of-wed-lock births and less commitment among working African American men” (Lawson & Thomason, 1995, pp 215). This is a prime example of how the structural and social factors of the African American experience intertwine. Now that it is clear how the issue of infidelity, gender ratio, and the spread of HIV and other STIs are connected, perhaps additions to AIDS and STI prevention curriculum can focus on healthy relationships.

Another social factor in the African American marriage decline is cohabitation. Within the last few decades, cohabitation of African American couples has become more popular and in turn, the rate of children born out of wedlock to African American parents has also increased. Chambers and Kravitz of The Family Institute at Northwestern University agree that a couple is more likely to have a child outside of marriage if they are cohabitating (Chambers & Kravitz, 2011). Demographic information that was gathered from a premarital training program done in 1992 showed that about sixty two percent of the participating couples had been living together prior to their wedding (Russell & Lyster, 1992). Although cohabitation is becoming so popular that it is sometimes considered to be a normal precursor to marriage, this does not pertain to the

African American community. “African American women tend to see [cohabitation] as an alternative to singlehood” and not as a steppingstone to marriage (Chambers & Kravitz, 2011, p. 651). Given this, it is in the best interest of the African American community that these and other facts are known so that they do not fall into the cycle of unhealthy relationships that continues to spiral downward.

Premarital Counseling Factors

Utilizing the definition of Carroll and Doherty, “premarital prevention is best defined as knowledge and skills-based training that provides couples with information on ways to sustain and improve their relationship once they are married”, and several research studies have shown that couples who participate in some type of relationship counseling are significantly better off than those who do not (Carroll & Doherty, 2003). The research of Antle, et al. explains that couples who participate in premarital counseling are less likely to break up or divorce for up to 5 years following the end of their training (Antle, Sar, Christensen, Ellers, Barbee & van Zyl, 2013). The tools and skills acquired in premarital counseling sessions, with a group or with one’s partner, can be utilized for the remainder of any relationship. In a more recent study of premarital counseling, men and women alike experienced positive increases in “communication skills, relationship functioning, friendship, dedication, and relationship confidence” (Owen, Quirk, Bergen, Inch & France, p. 296, 2012). However, the couples that go to counseling are generally low risk to begin with, and those who are in need of help, do not seek it (Carroll & Doherty, 2003).

Acknowledging this point, and the now common marital dissatisfaction rate, Russell and Lyster agree that the need for premarital counseling is necessary (Russell &

Lyster, 1992). “African American ... couples who experience race-related stress report less constructive communication, relationship satisfaction, and increased likelihood of aggression in the relationship” (Owen, Quirk, Bergen, Inch, France, p. 297, 2012). In other words, African American couples are ideal candidates for premarital relationship counseling.

Alternatively, it is unrealistic to expect one to participate in something that has no background on working with people of his or her ethnicity. Demographic information of thirteen premarital studies revealed that the sample of participants was overwhelmingly white and middle-class, and it is this lack of sample diversity that is one of the biggest issues in research surrounding marriage and family today (Antle, Sar, Christensen, Ellers, Barbee & van Zyl, 2013). To address this issue, a few researchers have made suggestions, yet none that were actually implemented could be found. Van Widenfelt et al. suggests that “A more thorough risk assessment could also be useful in tailoring the intervention more closely to the needs of the risk population (van Widenfelt, Hosman, Schaap, van der Staak, p. 164, 1996). Similarly, Russell and Lyster state, “tailoring of programs to participant characteristics such as ethnic background, education level, and history of previous relationships might ensure higher satisfaction” (Russell & Lyster, p. 450, 1992). Both of the above suggestions by the researchers advise that there must be some type of action to be taken to close the service gap for minority or “risk” populations.

To begin to address this gap in service to affect the current rates of African American marriage, it is necessary to combine the mentioned solutions with others, such as utilizing culturally relevant dynamics and being intentional about recruitment as

suggested by Antle, et al (Antle, Sar, Christensen, Ellers, Barbee & van Zyl, p. 346, 2013). Carroll and Doherty state that there is a need for “high risk” recruitment for premarital counseling groups and specialized programs according to race could be a big selling point to potential participants (Carroll & Doherty, 2003). “As policy and social discussion on premarital education increases, so does the need for sound research to determine effectiveness” (Carroll & Doherty, p. 105, 2003). The sound research being referred to will only come from programs such as The Umoja Curriculum.

CHAPTER 3

UMOJA INTERVENTION

Pre-assessment

Upon expressing interest in participation in The Umoja Curriculum, the couple will be invited to meet with the creator of the program at which qualification for participation will be determined. Qualification requirements include identifying as African American, getting married for the first time, and being within six months or more of the wedding date. In past research studies, the closer couples were to their wedding date, the lower their satisfaction ratings were of the program (Russell & Lyster, 1992). Perhaps this is a result of the existing stress of planning a wedding paired with the stress of discussing confrontational issues. Also at the pre-assessment meeting, The researcher will also go over the program's purpose, duration, requirements, and incentives. Said requirements are the pre-test, attendance at each session, and three post tests and incentives are child care, transportation, and a monetary gift card when the third post test is returned to the researcher via mail.

If the couple qualifies and still wants to participate thus far, they will be given the pre-test to assess the couples' knowledge of the topics that will be discussed over the next six weeks. Finally, the couples will return the pre-test, which they have filled out together, and will be asked if there are any other community resources that they think they could benefit from. At this time, couples will be given the opportunity to take

advantage of the childcare and transportation that is provided upon request on the days of The Umoja Curriculum sessions. Before the couple leaves, they will be told whether or not they have been accepted into the program and if so, they will also be informed of the start date and location of the curriculum.

The Curriculum

Each session of The Umoja Curriculum will begin with a routine that will occur at the beginning of every meeting. This routine consists of fellowship and refreshments, norms and expectations, sharing highs and lows, meditation and centering, and bucket questions. Within the African American community, there is a strong culture of “kinship” where it is expected that support of each other comes regardless of blood relation, or lack there of (Owen, Quirk, Bergen, Inch & France, 2012). Continuing with the theme of cultural relevancy, the fellowship and refreshments are a time to build community amongst the participating couples. There is also a stigma within the African American culture that surrounds mental health services of any kind, so this time is also to ease any potential tension within the group, hopefully making the couples feel comfortable and that they are not “alone” in unfamiliar territory. The co-facilitators are also engaged with participants at this point because research shows that group sessions have increased retention rates when the staff have a personal connection with the participants (Owen, Quirk, Bergen, Inch & France, 2012).

Following refreshments and fellowship is a segment called norms and expectations, where participants will have the opportunity to add to or subtract from a running list of norms and expectations that they have for the group. In this setting, a norm can also be called a ground rule, which could consist of line items such as respect or

confidentiality. With this, participants will be invited to make a verbal agreement between each other to abide by the norms that they have set together. An expectation in this case is something that the participants hope to get out of the program. Examples of expectations could be “to learn how to have a healthy argument with my partner” or “just to have fun”. As mentioned before, the participants will have the opportunity to add to and subtract from this list as we weeks go on, not only to set the tone for the group, but to also put effort towards encouraging participants to take ownership in their learning over the next few weeks.

Next, participants will be invited to share their highs and lows of the week in an effort to encourage group participation and group cohesiveness. Highs and lows also serve as a way for participants to get anything off of their chest that may distract them from focus on the session that day. A Meditation and centering exercise will follow highs and lows. This portion was implemented into The Umoja Curriculum because research shows that Americans do not take the time to slow down and reflect on themselves and their current situation, which can negatively affect relationships (Russell & Lyster, 1992). This activity was also implemented to help participants transition into a focused attitude for the session.

Finally, because it is not possible to address every skill and tool that can benefit a relationship in six weeks, participants will be encouraged to ask questions, anonymously if they choose, about any topic related to relationships that the co-facilitators will answer to the group. Again, this is to ensure that participants are included in their learning process.

Session One – Sankofa

Session one of The Umoja Curriculum is called Sankofa, which is an Adinkra word, primarily from Ghana, which means “go back and get it”. The topic of session one is family origin and current environment; the significance of the word Sankofa is that this symbol is typically used when talking about looking into one’s past in order to gain knowledge to go forward in one’s future. In this session, participants will receive information on the five researched factors of the African American Experience, history, economics, education, the structure of American society, and social life within the African American population, to fulfill the psycho-educational requirement of the program. Seeing that this session’s focus is on family origin, and the overall program is intentionally African and African American centered, African American ancestry and culture education is vital to be included in the program.

The psycho-drama portion of this session is called “family structure”. In this activity, participants will be invited to utilize group members and the entire room to create a 3D depiction of their current support system or family tree. This activity not only serves the purpose of showing partners how their significant other views their current support system and environment, but it also serves the purpose of an icebreaker for the group as well. Research has shown that exploration of one’s family origin is a highly rated, yet seldom talked about factor in premarital counseling groups (Russell & Lyster, 1992).

Session Two – Ujamaa

Session two of The Umoja Curriculum is called Ujamaa; a word used in Kwanzaa

meaning cooperative economics, which is appropriate seeing that the topic of session two is financial planning and co-money management. The psycho-educational section of this session consists of equipping couples with the information, tools and skills to budget and spend money as a unit. Because The Umoja Curriculum is designed for couples who are getting married for the first time, the average age range of participants is likely to be younger than those who are getting married for the second or more time. Since younger couples have a stronger need for information and practical material, which can be addressed without impinging too harshly on deeper relationship issues, finance was added early in the session to ensure that as many couples benefitted from this session as possible (Russell & Lyster, 1992). If a couple decides that they do not want to continue the program at this point, at least this informational need is met.

Because research shows that economic strain can cause more disruption in a minority relationship than a Caucasian relationship, the creator of The Umoja Curriculum saw this as a valuable addition (Owen, Quirk, Bergen, Inch & France, 2012). This session on co-money also addresses the fact mentioned earlier in this work that African American women now have higher incomes than African American men, which in turn, may cause some gender role conflict within the home.

The psycho-drama portion of this section is called “the game of life” where participants will be given “play money” to go around the room or facility and “shop” for various lifestyle items and necessities that they would need if they were moving to a new city. Each individual will be given an occupation, existing debt, and a salary at random and it will be up to the couple to determine how they will spend their money. Examples of items available for purchase are apartments, furniture, food, and entertainment. After

each couple has purchased their items of choice, they will go back and talk about how they spent their money and evaluate how they affectively used the information that they had just learned. By design, this topic will spark conversation between couples, which is why the topic of roles and expectations is the focus of session three.

Session Three – Ujima

Session three of The Umoja Curriculum is called Ujima, which is another word from Kwanzaa that means collective work and responsibility. This section's topic is roles and expectations in a relationship. It is also the session where the participants are given a feedback form to evaluate how the sessions are going for them and any suggestions that they may have to make their experience a better one. The feedback form is given at the end of the third session because there is seldom a one hundred percent retention rate in group sessions. The feedback form at the end of the third session is designed to collect data from those who may not complete the full program. Another intention of this tool is to give participants the space to feel involved in their leaning process.

The psycho-educational section of session three provides clients with collected data on the African American experience that may challenge roles and expectations in a marital relationship. For example, as mentioned earlier, African American women have a higher incomes than African American men, which has the potential to cause role confusion in the home depending on each individual's perspective on roles and expectation of their partner. Also mentioned earlier in this work, African American men are now having to work more than one job to support their families economically; an

expectation that a wife may have for her husband to spend more time with her and the family may be altered for this reason.

The psycho-drama section of session three is an activity called “role play” where the men and women will separate into two rooms to make two lists on a large sheet of paper and the group will have one minute to make each list. The male facilitator will go with the men to be the scribe for the group and the female facilitator will do the same for the women. The first list that will be generated will be titled “roles that I have/expectations that I have of myself” and the second list will be titled “roles that my partner has/expectations that I have for my partner”. Once both lists are completed, the participants will re-enter their original meeting space and sit with the group that they made their lists with. The facilitators will then reveal the lists, one at a time and read each item aloud. This activity will conclude with discussion of the similarities and differences of the lists and why the items on the list were placed where they were. Because this activity is likely to ignite lively conversation, the placement of the next session is intentional: communication.

Session Four – Mate Masie

Session four of The Umoja Curriculum is called Mate Masie, meaning, “what I hear, I keep”. The topic of session four is communication, so the psycho-educational portion of this session is focused on tools and skills that participants can use to communicate more effectively such as reflecting feelings, using open ended questions, using “I statements”, and practicing self disclosure, owning personal feelings, and warmth. A group of researchers agreed that if couples learn to genuinely express themselves in a nonthreatening way, then their overall interpersonal skills level would

improve (Ridley, Avery, Harrell, Leslie & Dent, 1981). Couples who identify as African American experience pressure and discrimination from society are more likely to have communication issues in their relationships (Owen, Quirk, Bergen, Inch & France, 2012). Communication skills training has been proven to decrease relationship aggression (Antle, Sar, Christensen, Elllers, Barbee & van Zyl, 2013), which can be a result of race-related stress, such as racism and institutional discrimination (Owen, Quirk, Bergen, Inch & France, 2012). Continuing to pay attention to the African American experience and being intentional about its implementation into the program, the reasons above support communication as a session in the The Umoja Curriculum.

Considering the strengths of communication skills building, the psycho-drama portion of session four is an activity called “elephant in the room” where partners will sit facing each other and one will speak on three topics while the other only responds with nonverbal communication, only to acknowledge that they are listening. The three topics that will be addressed by each speaker are what they love about their partner, one thing that their partner can work on, and one significant memory that they have together and why it is special. Speakers will be encouraged to use the skills and tools learned in the psycho-educational section of this session in this activity. As mentioned earlier, as individuals seldom take time to focus on themselves, couples suffer from the same issue. Session four of The Umoja Curriculum was selected to surround the topic of communication also because research shows that it is both highly rated and commonly used in premarital counseling groups (Carroll & Doherty, 2003). Session five’s topic of conflict resolution is complementary to communication, and was therefore placed as four with this intention.

Session Five – Mpatapo

The topic of session five of The Umoja Curriculum is conflict resolution and is called Mpatapo, which means “peace making after strife. The significance of this Adinkra symbol is that it signifies the bond that two are capable of, even after conflict. The psycho-educational portion covers how conflict can arise, how to deal with conflict in a healthy way, and how to prevent unnecessary conflict. As mentioned above, it is appropriate to implement conflict resolution in The Umoja Curriculum because of the potential stress that racial discrimination can have on a relationship. Research shows that teaching conflict resolution skills in premarital counseling can increase positive connections between partners, “clarify expectations...and enhance commitment” (Owen, Quirk, Bergen, Inch & France, 2012). Researchers Carroll and Doherty agree, “the importance of functional communication for establishing couple consensus and managing conflict during the transition to marriage has been supported by the research” (Carroll & Doherty, 2003). Conflict resolution was also included in The Umoja Curriculum because it was found to be beneficial in numerous premarital counseling groups that were researched for this project.

“Positive spin” is the psycho-dynamic activity that completes session five, in which the group will come together as a whole and create their own definition of conflict that does not include any negative words. By design, this activity will create conflict within the group, in which they will have the opportunity to utilize the skills talked about to overcome the obstacle and complete the task. This activity is also designed to allow participants to bond with those who are in the group with them. Remembering that

kinship is an important dynamic within the African American culture, group activities are imperative to include in a culturally relevant program.

As mentioned above, one who has a higher education degree may approach issues differently than one who does not. An important piece of the African American experience is that African American women are getting advanced educational degrees at a rate that is higher than African American men. Relating back to session three, due to differing approaches to issues that arise, this may also cause conflict of roles and expectations. Seeing that this is a growing phenomenon within the African American community, it is important that it be addressed in The Umoja Curriculum.

Session Six – Boa Me Na Mmoa Wo

The sixth and final session of The Umoja Curriculum is called Boa Me Na Mmoa Wo, meaning “cooperation-help me and let me help you”. To close the sessions, the topic of the last session is togetherness and separateness, and intimacy, in which the psycho-educational portion will consist of the importance of having one’s own identity while in a relationship and how to show affection to your partner. Seeing that several of the topics of The Umoja Curriculum have the potential to cause stress within the participants relationship, the creator saw that it was necessary to still add those potentially stressful topics, and utilize the topics of session six to ensure that the program ended on a positive note. Because research has demonstrated that couples who complete premarital programs have significantly improve in the areas of empathy and warmth, the creator saw that it was appropriate to add togetherness and separateness as session six to allow couples the

space to show their partner their improvement in these, and other, areas covered in the program (Carroll & Doherty, 2003)

The activity for this session is called “dear my love” where participants will have the opportunity to write two letters; one to their partner and one themselves. The purpose of this activity is to allow the participants to reflect upon themselves as an individual and the skills that they personally have gained from the program. This activity is also designed to allow partners to express their appreciation and love for one another and to agree that they will utilize the skills and tools learned for the duration of their relationship.

Over the course of the six sessions, the group will have formed a bond and have created a group dynamic that is specific to them. In the field of Social Work, it is important to acknowledge this fact, especially at time of closure. In the effort of a healthy closure to the group, participants will be invited to participate in a closing activity called “community web”. At this point, the participants will sit in a circle and the facilitators will stand outside of it. After a moment of reflection, who ever feels so inclined will begin to talk about their experience in The Umoja Curriculum and what they have learned in the process. A ball of yarn will be given to the first speaker from one the facilitators. When another participant hears a statement that they can attest to as well, they will indicate that they feel the same way, via hand gesture, and the yarn ball will be passed to that participant. The original speaker will hold the beginning of the yarn ball until everyone in the group has participated. At this point, participants will be encouraged to reflect upon the significance of the web that they have created and take a piece of the web that has been created to tie it around their wrist. Not only will this serve as the group

closure activity that calls for reflection on each factor and section of the program, but it will also produce a visual reminder of the skills and tools that they have learned and built over the course of The Umoja Curriculum.

Directly following this activity, the first post-test will be administered to the participants. The Likert scale and free-response questions are designed to collect data for the betterment of The Umoja Curriculum its self and to assess what knowledge and skills participants have gained over the six sessions.

Evaluation

Evaluation of The Umoja Curriculum will consist of a pre-test and three post-tests, which will be taken over the course of the first twelve month period following the completion of the program. Seeing that many researchers have deemed the utilization of the Likert scale for pre and post evaluations as reliable and valid, the evaluative tests of the The Umoja Curriculum will also utilize the Likert scale (Antle, Sar, Christensen, Ellers, Barbee & van Zyl, 2013). There will also be free response questions to ensure that as much feedback as possible is collected from the participants. The results of each post-test will be compared to the pre-test and to the post-test(s) that precede it evaluate the participants initial and outcome knowledge and utilization of the topics covered in the curriculum. General feedback on the program itself will be collected as well. The pre-test will be taken at the time of intake assessment for the group, and the post-tests will be distributed at the end of session six, six months after the end of session six, and one year after session six. Researchers at the University of Louisville included stamped envelopes with their mailed evaluations and offered a monetary gift if all three post tests were

returned to the researchers (Antle, Sar, Christensen, Ellers, Barbee & van Zyl, 2013). Modeling after the successful evaluation of *Within My Reach* at the University of Louisville, participants of The Umoja Curriculum will also receive their last two post-tests via mail and will receive a monetary gift upon completion and return of the all three post-tests.

Because it is each couples' opinion that is being sought after, the participating couples will be required to fill out pre and post-tests together to get a "valid rating of the couple's experience" (Russell & Lyster, 1992). The significance of data from three evaluations over the span of twelve months is that extended utilization of the skills and knowledge acquired through The Umoja Curriculum can be evaluated. Research shows that overall effectiveness of a premarital relationship skills program can only be determined over time (Carroll & Doherty, 2003).

Aside from self-reported evaluation of the program, the facilitators of The Umoja Curriculum will also contribute observational feedback on the progress each of the participating couples. Researchers agree, "exclusion of observational measures...limits the understanding of how an intervention impacts couples" (van Widenfelt, Hosman, Schaap & van der Staak, p. 165, 1996). Because there is no standard evaluation for all premarital training programs, it is imperative that both self-reported and objective feedback is collected (Carroll & Doherty, 2003).

Logistics

There are several reasons why The Umoja Curriculum is a plan for group premarital counseling and not individual couples counseling. Primarily, group counseling

presents the opportunity to help numerous clients in the time that it would take to help one couple or an individual. For this economic reason, The Umoja Curriculum is designed for a group setting. Another reason why a group setting is utilized, specifically for The Umoja Curriculum being a culturally relevant, African American centered program, is that within the African American culture there is a strong sense of community and family between blood related and non-blood related individuals. This cultural “kinship” is also utilized in the program as a means to combat the stigma that exists within the African American community surrounding mental health counseling (Owen, Quirk, Bergen, Inch & France, 2012). It is the hope of the program that participants will feel more comfortable with mental health counseling if they are in a group setting, and in turn, beginning to dispel the stigma within the community as a whole.

The duration of each of the six sessions of The Umoja Curriculum will be ninety minutes and they will occur once every week for six week. In these ninety minutes, clients will go through the beginning routine explained above, and utilize psycho-educational and psycho-drama tools to learn, reinforce, and reiterate the topic of that particular session. Acknowledging that there is an existing stigma within the African American community surrounding mental health services, all of the above is implemented in an effort to spark the interest of couples in the African American community in hopes of removing the initial barriers from service such as transportation and childcare. Also during the ninety-minute sessions, the facilitators will take time to get to know the couples on a more personal level, primarily during the fellowship portion at the beginning of each session. Research has shown that facilitators who get to know their

clients between sessions have a higher retention and feedback rate than those who do not (Owen, Quirk, Bergen, Inch & France, 2012). This interaction can also have a positive effect on the couple's relationship as well by making couples feel more comfortable with sharing with the facilitators.

In the field of Social Work, the optimal counseling group size is eight to twelve clients. With this being true, The Umoja Curriculum will be limited to four to six couples. The Umoja curriculum will also be a closed-group session. In other words, no one will be able to join the group once the first session has taken place in an effort to foster community between the participants and to ensure the comfort of the group members. Group dynamics change depending on who is in the group; no additional couples will be added to the group in order to allow the group to get comfortable with each other. Outreach for participants of The Umoja Curriculum will happen through connections to community mental health providers, community calendars, and community involvement and health fairs. Several sources noted that intentional outreach was necessary to target participants who do not typically gravitate towards mental health counseling. For this reason, community mental health providers and other social service employees will be encouraged to invite specific, qualifying couples to participate if any are known.

Funding for The Umoja Curriculum will be pursued through grants and community donations. The location of The Umoja Curriculum will be a neutral ground, community space so that no potential participants feel excluded or threatened. Examples of a location where sessions could take place are community rooms in public city buildings or community centers; not at a place of worship or a political headquarters. While in session, participants will sit in a semi or full circle, as opposed to stadium or

classroom style, to facilitate discussion and cohesiveness among the group member and the facilitators.

There will be one male and one female facilitator, who both must identify as African American, have a background in community mental health and community resources, and be familiar with the area in which the group will take place. Some researchers of Louisville, KY attest to the benefits of male-female co-facilitation and the facilitators' familiarity with the population and the community for the sake of relating to the participants and understanding their environment (Owen, Quirk, Bergen, Inch & France, 2012). Antel, et al. also agree that facilitators who are familiar with participants, or at least familiar with their circumstances, are likely to be more effective than those who are not (Antle, Sar, Christensen, Elllers, Barbee & van Zyl, 2013).

Lastly, to remove any other potential barriers from service, refreshments, childcare, and transportation for each session will be offered to the participating couples. As stated in the research article on the *PREP* program, if all known potential barriers are avoided prior to the commencement of sessions, "it may be easier for couples to then focus on and work through their relational dynamics" (Owen, Quirk, Bergen, Inch & France, p. 304, 2012). Also, Antle, et al. agree that if other needs besides their relationship are addressed overall outreach and participation will increase (Antle, Sar, Christensen, Elllers, Barbee & van Zyl, 2013).

CHAPTER 4

LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Limitations

There is no set standard for research, implementation, or evaluation of premarital counseling groups. Therefore, the first and most important limitation to note is that The Umoja Curriculum has not been tested. Though many premarital relationship skills group outlines and programs share skills and tools, no two are alike, making it difficult to determine a standard for premarital counseling groups. In this sense, what determines whether or not a program is effective or not is solely dependent upon the outcome of the group, which is subject to change depending who is in the group and their collective group dynamic. Though the research is both extensive and comprehensive, the program has not been implemented in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the program.

As explained in the curriculum logistics, the evaluation piece of The Umoja Curriculum includes one pre test and three post- tests that participants of the program are required to take, together as a couple, spanning over a 12-month period. The pre and post-tests are designed to evaluate participants' initial and outcome knowledge and utilization of the topics covered in the curriculum, and their general feedback on the program itself and its facilitators.

The next most important limitation to indicate is that there is limited literature available on the African American family and African American marriage. Furthermore,

there was no research discovered that analyzed strictly African American marriage or culturally relevant interventions for African Americans. In turn, the limited amount of research was supplemented with credible sources, some from a number of years ago, on five factors of the African American experience, which were history, economics, education, structure of American society, and social life within the African American population, and premarital counseling group literature that acknowledges the African American family and the lack of research that exists on the population as it pertains to this topic.

Another limitation of this study is that research was limited to heterosexual couples who are getting married for the first time. The impact of African American homosexual couples on the over rates of African American marriage were not researched and neither were the statistics for those who are getting married for the second time or more.

Conclusion

The Umoja Curriculum is a proactive premarital counseling group plan designed to provide African American couples with the tools and skills to obtain and sustain a healthy marital relationship. Research has shown that healthy households positively impact the communities that surround them; with the interactive, psycho-educational, psycho-drama units implemented in The Umoja Curriculum, it is designed with culturally relevant dynamics to increase the number of healthy households within the African American Community. Over time, The Umoja Curriculum will impact the falling

marriage rates within the African American community, increasing healthy marriages and decreasing divorce rates.

The overall goal of The Umoja Curriculum is to contribute to the literature that exists on and for the African American family in a new and creative way. There is a lack of available literature on African American relationships from a culturally relevant perspective and the addition of The Umoja Curriculum will address this need. During the research process for this project, more reports on the statistics of the failing rates of African American healthy and two-parent homes were available than there were proposed solutions, which only hinder the reconstruction of the African American household.

The author's short-term goal for The Umoja Curriculum is to equip African American couples with the tools, skills, and the confidence to build and sustain healthy marriages and therefore, increasing the overall African American marriage rate. The author's long-term goal for this program is to decrease the overall rate of poverty, under-education, and social deviance among the African American population by way of increasing the number of healthy, African American households with healthy relationships. It is the author's aspiration that the number of said households will multiply over the next generations due to the increase of African American role-model relationships. When implemented, The Umoja Curriculum will be a catalyst in the sense that it will perpetuate a cycle of reconstruction of the African American community beginning with the structure, health, and strength of the African American family.

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