# Providing Relationship Education for Low-Income and Diverse Audiences: A Phenomenological Investigation

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**ABSTRACT.** Unprecedented public interest and government funding have been directed to promoting healthy relationships over the last 2 decades. Current research on relationship education (RE) for low-income and diverse populations primarily includes suggestions and ideas for successful implementation. Research-derived best practices are less common. As part of a statewide healthy relationship initiative, 14 Cooperative Extension agents provided RE for low-income and diverse audiences within their respective counties. A phenomenological approach was used to describe agents' shared experiences in providing RE. Major themes included planning with diverse audiences in mind, implementing programming with diverse audiences, and agents' knowledge and commitment to their communities. Results are discussed in terms of practical implications for providing RE for low-income and diverse populations.

*Keywords:* diversity, family life education, marriage, relationship education

Relationship education (RE) has pre–World War II roots and has since expanded and become more systematic (Silliman & Schumm, 2000). Over the past 2 decades, federal and state governments have appropriated an unprecedented amount of public funding toward services that support "healthy marriage" (Brotherson & Duncan, 2004). The increased public interest in RE has been associated with a better understanding of the factors related to marital satisfaction, rates of divorce, domestic violence, the growing evidence of the successes of RE programs, and the increased interest in preventative care (Brotherson & Duncan; Silliman & Schumm). However, the majority of RE programs have been developed primarily for White (non-Hispanic), middle-class participants (Ooms & Wilson, 2004). Questions remain as to whether RE programs developed for one target group are effective when used with different populations (Coie et al., 1993), and how best to design and implement programming for diverse populations. The term *diverse populations* can include heterogeneous audiences (e.g., multiple ethnic and socioeconomic statuses represented) and homogeneous audiences of underserved ethnic or socioeconomic groups. The current study primarily focuses on the latter, providing RE for audiences that have been traditionally underserved.

A recent meta-analysis of 15 studies evaluated the effectiveness of RE for low-income couples, only 6 of which were published or in press at the time of analysis (Hawkins & Fackrell, 2010). This meta-analysis of emerging research showed small to moderate effects, ranging from $d = .25$ to .29, similar to effects for middle-class participants. This indicates that low-income and middle-class couples report small to moderate improvements in their relationships through attending RE. However, much of the existing literature concerning RE for low-income and diverse audiences presents suggestions, ideas, and potential challenges for providing programming (e.g., Delgadillo, Ralph, Horrocks, Roberts, & Skogrand, 2009; Ooms & Wilson, 2004; Robertson et al., 2006; Skogrand & Shirer, 2007), and there is far less research that evaluates implementation. Additional research is now needed to show how such challenges have actually been managed in practice. Using phenomenology, the current study examined the shared experiences of Cooperative Extension county agents who provided RE for diverse and low-income audiences.

## Relationship Education for Low-income and Diverse Audiences
## Ethnicity and Socioeconomic Status in the United States

Understanding the current racial and socioeconomic status composition of the United States can be helpful in seeing the need for RE for underserved populations. In the United States, the largest minority racial group is Latino/Hispanic (16.3%), followed by African American (12.6%), Asian (4.8%), and Native American (.9%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Clearly, racial categories do not comprise homogeneous groups (Banks, 2009), and terms such as *ethnicity* (commonalities transmitted via family and community) and *culture* (socially constructed norms and values) may perhaps be more helpful (Hays, 1996). For example, within Latino populations heterogeneity is evidenced by, but not limited to, race, language, country of origin, migration patterns, and socioeconomic status (Aguilar-Gaxiola, Kramer, Resendez, & Magana, 2008).

It has been estimated that approximately half of the American population will experience poverty before the age of 65 (Rank, 2009). DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, and Smith (2010) indicated that between the years 2004 and 2007 approximately 31.6% of the total U.S. population had at least one episode of poverty lasting for 2 or more months. Rates of poverty in the United States have increased across ethnicities between the years 2008 and 2009, but some ethnic groups continue to be more vulnerable (DeNavas-Walt et al., 2010). The poverty rate increased for non-Hispanic White, Hispanic, and Black Americans during this time period. Hispanic (25.3% in poverty) and Black Americans (25.8% in poverty) were more likely to be poor when compared to non-Hispanic White Americans (9.4% in poverty). Asian Americans' poverty rate increased from 1.6 million living in poverty in 2008 to 1.7 million, or 12.5% living in poverty in 2009. Unique cultural factors need to be considered in developing and providing appropriate RE for

low-income and diverse populations (Ooms & Wilson, 2004; Skogrand, 2004; Skogrand & Shirer, 2007; Wiley & Ebata, 2004).

**Culturally Appropriate Education**

Historically, many minority ethnic groups have not had positive experiences with Caucasian, middle-class America, which may result in distrust (Skogrand & Shirer, 2007). This distrust may lead to a lack of engagement of low-income and diverse populations in RE. To increase the likelihood of participation of people from these underserved populations, educators should strive to be sensitive to the audience's value system (Skogrand, Barrios-Bell, & Higginbotham, 2009) and provide education that meets their unique needs (Wiley & Ebata, 2004). Research suggests that values are ranked differently by low- and high-socioeconomic individuals (Rokeach, 2000). Educational programming, as a result, needs to be altered to maintain consistency with these values. For example, Skogrand and colleagues (2009), in providing stepfamily education for Latino participants, found that family was highly valued and viewed as sacred. Practices were recommended to ensure sensitivity to this cultural value.

Previous research also indicates that Latino populations may not seek support services in their communities because of language proficiency, undocumented legal status, and lack of knowledge concerning the services available (González-Guarda, Peragallo, Vasquez, Urrutia, & Mitrani, 2009). It has been proposed that reaching diverse populations requires more creative recruitment procedures (Coie et al., 1994), partnering with people or organizations that provide existing services for these populations to increase awareness (Ooms & Wilson, 2004; Skogrand & Shirer, 2007; Wiley & Ebata, 2004), and selecting non governmental locations to host RE (Skogrand, 2004). Reaching diverse and low-income populations, according to current suggestions in the literature, requires unique preparation in the planning and implementation of RE programs when compared to audiences more traditionally served (Ooms & Wilson; Wiley & Ebata).

### The Role of Cooperative Extension in Relationship Education

Basic considerations when offering RE include the sponsors, the location, and the facilitators (Hawkins, Carroll, Doherty, & Willoughby, 2004). This study examined the experiences of Cooperative Extension agents (also commonly referred to as Extension faculty or Extension educators) as coordinators of community RE programs. The purpose of Cooperative Extension is to extend university research and resources to the local community through program implementation (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2011). Formalized in 1914 by the Smith–Lever Act, Extension emerged when land-grant universities formed a partnership with the U.S. Department of Agriculture to meet the agricultural needs of people living in rural areas. Over the

years, this has included RE programs in rural and urban counties (Goddard & Olsen, 2004). Using Extension agents as the coordinators provided a consistent, professional setting. This design facilitates the goal of deriving conclusions that could then be applied throughout the Cooperative Extension system.

## Purpose of Current Study

Much of the current literature about providing RE for diverse populations provides personal opinions and suggestions, but there is relatively little research evaluating implementation (Hawkins & Fackrell, 2010). Reaching diverse and low-income populations with RE will not solve all of the challenges faced by these populations, but could make a meaningful impact in people's lives if programs are developed, targeted, and implemented to meet the unique needs of these populations (Ooms & Wilson, 2004). In a 2004 special edition of *Family Relations*, Ooms and Wilson predicted that it would take roughly a decade to better understand the design, implementation, and evaluation of RE for low-income populations. As a step toward that goal, the current study addresses the experiences of Extension agents as they provided RE for low-income and diverse populations. This study is part of a state-funded Healthy Relationship Initiative (HRI). Cooperative Extension agents applied for funding by proposing RE activities that would meet the needs of residents in their counties. In 2009 a variety of RE activities were implemented by agents in 14 counties throughout a Western state. These activities included one-time events such as lunch-and-learn sessions or experiential date nights, as well as longer RE programming. The HRI request for proposals from county Extension agents included a priority focus on services for low-income premarital, engaged, and newlywed couples.

## Methodology

### Design

A phenomenological qualitative research design was used to discover facilitators' shared experiences in providing RE for low-income and diverse populations. A phenomenological study aims to capture the lived experiences of several people who experience a specific phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Van Manen (1990) described a phenomenon as an "object" of human experience. Researchers identify a phenomenon of interest, focus on the individual experiences of several people with the phenomenon, and then identify what the participants have in common when they experience the phenomenon (van Manen).

**Sample**

A comprehensive sampling procedure was used. All county Family and Consumer Science (FCS) Extension agents who provided RE for the state HRI initiative were asked to participate in this study. In total, 14 agents received funding and, as HRI grant recipients, dedicated a portion of their time to programming for low-income and diverse audiences. All 14 agents elected to participate in this phenomenological investigation of their RE experiences.

All of the Extension agents in the sample had attained master's degrees and self-reported Caucasian ethnicity. The entire sample was female with the exception of one male. Ages of agents ranged from 32 to 63 years of age with a mean of 49 years. The sample included 64% who were married, 21% who were single, and 14% who were divorced or separated. Agents indicated a range of 2 to 30 years of experience with the Cooperative Extension system with a mean of 12 years. The agents reported that, on average, they spent 18% of their Extension time on family relations programming. Only 2 of the 14 agents reported that this was their first experience providing RE within their counties, indicating the majority had some previous experience providing RE at a county level. According to their estimates, services were provided for approximately 63% urban, 23% suburban, and 14% rural participants.

**Data Collection and Analyses**

Data were collected and triangulated through the use of quarterly activity reports and agent interviews. Quarterly reports were completed by the agents and included questions concerning their progress on the RE programs for which they were funded, successes and challenges they experienced in planning and implementing RE, and requests for any technical support. At the end of the grant year, semi-structured interviews were conducted in person by the primary investigator and/or one research assistant. The semi-structured interviews included questions addressing the successes and challenges in providing RE in general and specific open-ended questions concerning the experience of providing RE for low-income and minority residents within their counties. Interviews lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes. Each interview was audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Demographic information was collected from each agent through a paper-pencil form. The final dataset was composed by identifying all information related to providing RE for diverse and low-income populations from quarterly reports and transcribed interviews. Proportionate amounts of data came from the interviews and quarterly reports.

Data were analyzed using two phenomenological processes as described by van Manen (1984). The first process (the highlighting approach) requires that the manuscripts be read through several times. Statements and phrases that are essential or revealing about a participant's

experience with the phenomenon are highlighted. The second process is the line-by-line approach. This process requires that every sentence be examined with an attempt to understand how it relates to the lived experience. Van Manen recommended that both approaches be used to identify common themes among the participants.

Two independent coders used both of van Manen's (1984) methods by reading and re-reading the written transcripts from the 14 interviews and the quarterly reports. The coders then independently identified regularities and commonalities amongst the agents' experiences. Van Manen (1990) indicated that phenomenology is not only a description, but an interpretive process. Researchers first used this interpretive liberty to collaboratively develop and label themes for the identified common experience. Later, the transcripts were independently coded by the two researchers into themes. Agreement between the coders was 87%, indicating high intercoder agreement (Patton, 2002). Disagreements were resolved by consulting the data and developing consensus about which categories best represented the participants' experiences.

A variation of member checking was used to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings (Cho & Trent, 2006). Five agents (from two urban counties, two suburban counties, and one rural county) who participated in the study were asked to review the findings section of this paper. The selected agents were asked four structured questions aimed at checking the written accuracy of the common experiences. Feedback from the selected agents indicated that text was representative of their experiences. Minor suggestions were implemented into the final document. The findings of this study represent the common themes of the agents.

## Results

Three major themes emerged from agents' descriptions of providing RE for low-income and diverse audiences: First, agents planned programs with diverse audiences in mind. They planned programming at a local level to purposefully recruit people from their target audiences—"mulling over" target audience characteristics and needs, agents tailored programming to meet these specific needs, being inclusive of low-income and diverse attendees. Second, agents implemented programming with diverse audiences. They considered and included diversity in implementing their programs, and reflected on the outcomes in terms of the people who attended and how local partnerships worked. Third, agents had specific knowledge of and commitment to their communities—they described their familiarity with the populations in their respective counties, and indicated a dedication to serving those of diverse economic and ethnic compositions.

**Planning Programs with Diverse Audiences in Mind**

The Extension agents shared a broad understanding of the needs of low-income and diverse populations within their counties. When planning RE programming, agents accounted for these specific needs and acknowledged that it can be more challenging than working with Caucasian middle-class participants. Agents used words and phrases such as "inclusive," "gear the programming," and "accessible" to explain that, regardless of the difficulty, it was important at the outset to plan to meet all county members' needs. Most of the agents (12 of 14) spoke specifically about considering participant needs in relation to program planning and recruitment at a local level.

**Meeting participant needs.** Agents not only talked about the importance of providing education for low-income and diverse audiences but also described their thinking about tailoring the programming to meet the audiences' unique needs. Highlighting this point, one agent said, "I think diversity is great. I think it would be nice if we could have more diversity, but you have to address the differences if you're going to offer programming." Another agent said, "The Spanish [-speaking] population's ideas of marriage are different than Whites that have been in the United States a long time." In targeting low-income and diverse populations in their counties, agents described considerations that needed to be made when selecting curricula and identifying educators for the courses. Concerning finding materials and educators for programming, an agent said, "We need help in finding a good marriage curriculum in Spanish. We need to find qualified instructors to teach the Latino marriage classes who can speak Spanish."

Cultural appropriateness was also collectively discussed by agents in terms of planning the course format, determining the level of intervention (e.g., couple, family), and selecting the venue for the RE. For example, in determining the format of a program, one agent described thoughts about meeting unique needs of populations:

The groups that are more high risk or more high need have a lot more challenges. I don't know that a one-time class is really going to benefit them as much. They could get something out of it for sure. But are they going to? Is that information going to be sustained for them through some of their challenges? I think that a series of classes will be more beneficial, where the materials are being emphasized or re-emphasized in different ways with different concepts.

Agents explained that the level of intervention may be different when working with different cultures. For example, one person said:

> The Hispanic population is more family oriented, so we need to look at doing a family activity, and if we're going to do something with just the parents then we need to do something to work with the kids at the same time.

Agents also addressed the importance of finding a location that would fit the participants' needs. One agent said, "Coming to the county administration building for a class may be a deterrent for some of the low-income people because it is a government facility."

Agents shared common concerns about the feasibility of their programming for low-income and diverse audiences. Recognizing the needs of the participants was one step, and planning to meet the needs was a second step. Agents found it difficult to identify culturally specific curriculum and culturally appropriate educators. For example, one agent shared thoughts about finding an educator for the program:

> I have done a lot of programs [with American Indians] and you just have to find the right connection. When I couldn't find an educator, I was encouraged to teach it myself. I'm White, and if I am going in to teach people in this culture how to have a stronger marriage, it doesn't hold water, period. I mean, I couldn't really make any progress with that—it would not have flown. I could pay them any amount of money for incentives and I wouldn't have got a good class because of that.

Agents also talked about financial limitations in providing culturally appropriate RE. Planning incentives, reserving locations, buying curriculum, and hiring educators were discussed as being expensive endeavors. One agent said:

> I can't work with the Latino community if I don't have money, because they will not come if we don't feed them dinner and provide child care. That is very expensive. So I knew I wanted to get back and work with the Latino community again, but I had to have money.

Agents collectively described ways of overcoming challenges in planning culturally sensitive programming. A common solution involved working with community partnerships and people from the target audience. One agent explained, "We met with our Latino Advisory Council to get input on the classes and advertising to ensure that they are culturally appropriate."

**Recruitment.** Agents identified unique differences and challenges in recruiting people for RE from low-income and diverse audiences. One of the common challenges that surfaced from agents' feedback was the lack of awareness of educational opportunities among low-income and diverse audiences. One agent explained:

> I think there are a lot of programs available for these audiences, but I don't know if they are aware of them. That's why it's important to target the low-income or the Hispanic populations. Not that they need it more than anybody else—just that it's not something that they are aware of.

Agents also reported that traditional recruiting techniques did not reach diverse and low-income audiences. For example, an agent explained, "It's hard for me to advertise to the lower-income people because they don't get the newspaper." Agents discussed the importance of thinking differently or, as one agent put it, developing new "mindsets" when trying to recruit target audiences.

One such mindset that led to increased recruitment was developing relationships with people in the target population and forming partnerships with organizations that provided services for these populations. Collaborations were discussed as being more effective than using traditional recruitment methods alone. One agent commented, "We sent our flyers out to specific areas where we knew that we could reach the greatest number of Hispanic people. That was okay, but I know that's not as effective as if they know someone." Another agent described the multiple methods used to get the word out to people:

> Approximately 2,000 flyers have been distributed to schools and Latino businesses for advertising. A staff member will be interviewed on the radio the week before the classes begin. We are relying heavily on our Advisory Council to assist with helping us get the word out to members of the Latino community.

Agents spoke specifically of collaborating with a variety of different organizations. Community schools and churches were commonly mentioned as successful collaborators for recruiting. One agent stated, "Working with the schools really does help because they have a captivated audience—not just the kids, but the teachers. They have a network for sending things home to help disseminate information. I think that is a good collaboration." Some government-funded agencies already provide services for these target populations (e.g., Head Start). Agents asserted that developing collaborations with these organizations is an effective way to reach a preexisting audience. For example, one person concluded, "The best way to reach a low-income/diverse population is to go to collaborators and have something they are required to go to, because it is just not on their radar."

Additionally, agents talked about the importance of providing incentives when recruiting low-income and diverse audiences for RE, explaining that providing programming for free or offering scholarships may not be enough to get people to attend. Agents acknowledged that working with collaborators and providing incentives resulted in increased participation. This observation is illustrated in the following agent's statement:

> The other thing that I have learned has been that we need a different mentality to really get the low-income families involved. We are advertising to partners/groups where low-income families frequent, but we are not necessarily seeing a lot of them actually coming to the classes. A lady from Community Action made the comment that some kind of an incentive like a gas/grocery card or cash would be quite beneficial for their clients, especially if it were a sizable amount.

## Implementing Programming with Diverse Audiences

Twelve of the 14 agents talked about the realities of implementing RE with diverse audiences at a local level. Agents talked about the interconnectedness between collaborators, participants, and facilitators in the implementation process. For example, one agent explained:

> I need to get with the people in that community so that they understand what we're doing and why we're doing it—then they would come. But we've had one group come and then those people are going to say, "You know it was really fun! It was a good thing I'm glad we went for that information." And then they may tell others. Once you have word-of-mouth, participation usually increases.

Using this same line of thought, another agent said, "You need to go where they are, meet their terms, and use their people. I mean, use members of that community in your program, and then you'll have success."

Agents also agreed that outcomes varied regardless of the plans that were in place. Agents shared ways in which flexibility was required when implementing RE with these audiences. Flexibility was a crucial element with facilitators, and in working through cultural differences, language differences, and time constraints. It was often difficult to find facilitators that spoke the language of the target audience. Flexibility was required when facilitators who spoke the language were not recruited or when facilitators cancelled shortly before the program. For example, one agent said, "We had a guest speaker cancel on us at the last minute. But one of our fabulous Spanish-speaking interns quickly stepped up and taught the class with less than a 24-hour notice."

Agents demonstrated flexibility with cultural differences in accepting unique expectations about attendance and child care. One agent said, "The Latino program is always a challenge because this culture does not preregister for an event. Therefore, we did a lot of guessing on numbers." Agents learned that it was not their role to change attendees' expectations about having their whole family attend, even after planning for couples-only attendance. For example, one agent explained:

> One thing that didn't work out quite the way we planned was [that] we specifically asked participants to attend as a couple—just as a couple, not as a family—and they had all agreed to do that. But when the night came they brought their family. And we just said, "okay," and opened the door and they all joined us.

Working with diverse and low-income populations was also a challenge because of language differences. Agents agreed that prior planning could not take into account all of the language differences. In some cases, flexibility was manifested with the use of family members as translators, hiring translators, and/or the use of technology. One agent reported:

> You know, we have people coming from Africa and from various other countries, and in one setting we might have a teenage child interpret for the parents or a husband will interpret for his wife. But we don't know if they're coming or not, so interpreters are difficult to provide.

Another participant said, "One of the daughters of one participant that didn't speak English came and she just interpreted for her mother. She wouldn't let me pay her for interpreting because she just interprets anyways." Another agent explained that a collaborating agency requested relationship education in Spanish and offered to provide interpreters. This agent described how this request was accommodated:

> I took a preexisting relationship education presentation, but on the top I wrote in English and on the bottom I put it in Spanish. I just used the translator on the computer. The interpreter said that it was so easy to interpret because the participants could read it and she did not have to say very much. The agency called me to come and do it in two other communities because they said it was really good.

Time commitments and constraints also presented themselves as challenges that required flexibility from the agents when implementing programming for low-income and diverse populations. This shared understanding was demonstrated with statements such as "our greatest barrier was time," "painstakingly time-consuming," "time constraints," and "programming for

members of the Latino community is very time-consuming." Participants talked about cultural differences in time perceptions. For example, "[American Indians] have a different concept of time." Agents acknowledged these differences and recognized how time influenced them in their role as facilitators. One agent acknowledged, "I wish I wasn't so time-oriented." Agents also noted time constraints specific to implementation, as indicated in comments such as "We have one finite little space of time and we have to do everything we do within that hour" and "There wasn't enough lead time."

Additionally, agents talked about the time involved in forming collaborations or partnerships within cultural groups. The cultural perceptions of time were identified as a barrier in this process, and flexibility was required to work with these perceptions:

> For them, not having plans 4 months in advance may not have been a big deal, and maybe they surely did plan to do something at the last minute. But I had gotten to the point where I couldn't risk it and so I had to weigh the options. So do I hurt someone's feelings in order to get the program done? And as you can see, if I hadn't done anything I wouldn't have reached the literally hundreds of people who we have now reached.

**Knowledge of and Commitment to Communities**

A prominent phenomenon was the agents' discussion of their extensive and evolving understanding of the people who live in their counties. Participants described counties in general terms such as "blue-collar community," "working poor," "predominately Caucasian," "international community," and "high Hispanic population," and their descriptions typically were based on personal interactions and relationships rather than mere demographic knowledge. They also used words such as "fluctuates," "touch and go," and "growing" as they described the process of continually learning about their ever-changing counties. Each county was presented as having unique needs that could be understood and met on a local level. During an interview on an American Indian reservation, one agent illuminated the importance of this intimate, ground-level understanding:

> I could've told you all about providing this program for [American Indians] over the phone, but what difference would that make? What would you really see? What would you really feel? How would you really understand? You couldn't capture the culture over the phone. You couldn't capture it in a written report.

Details of individual county's needs emerged as agents described their knowledge of the economic and cultural diversity within their counties. Agents are both residents and professionals within their counties. The interplay between these roles led to discussions of personal and

professional responsibilities in providing programming for low-income and diverse populations. Eleven of the 14 agents spoke specifically about these individual understandings and responsibilities. According to agents, providing services for difficult-to-reach populations can be challenging as well as rewarding.

**Economic and ethnic composition.** As agents shared their intimate knowledge about their counties, differences between counties in relation to ethnicity and economics emerged. Some counties were described as being more homogenous in ethnicity and socioeconomic status. For example, one agent said:

> Our whole county kind of qualifies as low income. For example, if you're using school lunch/breakfast programs as a determining factor, we are over 50% for the entire county. So [for] just about everything I do, I make the assumption we are working with low-income participants. As far as diversity in any other way, we are 98% Caucasian.

Other counties were described as having more complex diversity and socioeconomic situations. One person said, "There is a real disparity, but it's very diverse too. We have a lot of people. It's a very international community; it's not just your White, rich American people. You've got people from literally everywhere in the world."

Additionally, agents' understanding of the economic and ethnic composition in their counties was fluid and changing. The economic composition of one agent's county was influenced by the current recession, reported as follows:

> This community did not have a large low-income population. With the economy we've had, people who used to have a job… were laid off. So we have a larger low-income population now than we did maybe a year or two ago.

The growing rates of diversity within one participant's county were acknowledged: "The Latino population is growing by leaps and bounds in our county."

**Commitment and responsibility.** Agents commonly expressed a commitment to provide programming for low-income and diverse populations in conjunction with their responsibilities to serve everyone in their respective counties. Doing so was also connected with personal goals. In providing education for low-income residents, an agent noted, "I mean, that's a lot of what our job is. Most of the audiences that we work with are low income." Agents also talked about their responsibility to increase the accessibility of programming for diverse and low-income audiences. For example, one person said, "I'll provide more scholarships—whatever it takes. I'll come up with the money somehow. It's not been once, but many times that I have paid for

someone who could not afford to participate in the program."

The agents acknowledged challenges in their responsibility to reach low-income and diverse populations. One agent reported, "The hardest part of this is getting people to participate. These low-income and at-risk audiences have so many other challenges to deal with that relationships and communication [are] not high on their priority list." Another agent said, "Everybody has their right to choose what they want to learn, and so all we can do is offer it. But I think that we have a responsibility to try." Agents talked about moving beyond the challenges in their responsibilities toward proposed solutions. For example, one person said, "When working with the Latino community you have to build their trust. This usually takes someone from the Latino community to go face-to-face with them and say, 'Come to this.'"

Agents also talked about how their professional responsibilities fit with their personal goals. As a group, participants shared positive personal experiences from serving low-income and diverse populations. One person remarked, "I've been thoroughly surprised and happy with my association with them. I really love the Latino culture." The agents also described how sometimes personal goals and professional responsibilities conflicted. With large and diverse workloads, agents described ways to bridge professional responsibilities:

> You have to make it count. I try to find the things where my heart is, and that gives me the commitment to be able to do things that aren't easy. This program hasn't been easy, but to me it meant so much because I knew it could do so much good.

## Discussion

The current study used a phenomenological approach to identify the experiences of agents in providing RE for low-income and diverse populations. The use of strong qualitative methodology (e.g., multiple data sources, multiple interviewers, independent coders, and member checking) increased the richness and trustworthiness of the results. Common descriptions of the phenomenon emerged through interviews and written reports from agents. These agents provided RE in rural, urban, and suburban counties. The general themes addressed the areas of planning, implementation, and agents' evolving understanding of the people in their communities.

When planning RE for low-income and diverse audiences, agents voiced the importance of addressing the unique needs of these populations. They indicated that this involved first identifying participant needs and then determining ways to meet these needs. Consistent with Ooms and Wilson's (2004) recommendations, agents sought to find culturally appropriate curriculum and program facilitators from within the target audiences' cultures as way of meeting

participants' needs. The curricula selected by the different agents varied. Agents' reports were similar to conclusions drawn by previous research concerning stepfamily education with diverse populations—education can be used to build healthy relationships, provide new information, and increase support without interfering with cultural values or characteristics (Skogrand et al., 2009). Facilitators made this possible by learning about the target audiences they served, which allowed them to be sensitive to the cultural values and characteristics of their participants. Additionally, agents indicated that forethought was necessary to recruit participants. Developing collaborations and providing incentives were both ways to increase the visibility and accessibility of RE.

After formalizing a plan for RE, agents discussed the implementation of their educational opportunities. Implementation was described as being an interconnected process between collaborators, facilitators, and participants. Agents acknowledged that, even with prior planning, RE did not always go according to design when working with low-income and diverse audiences. The importance of flexibility was a common thread that tied the agents' experience of implementation together. Time frames and relationships with partnerships were acknowledged as specific factors that required flexibility.

An interesting finding was the extensive and evolving understanding that agents had about people who lived within their communities. Agents gained their understanding through interaction with the community members. Skogrand (2004) suggested that spending time with the target audience could increase learning about the population and the visibility of the educator. Each agent served a dual role as community member and educator, and agents' time spent in their communities seems to maintain an evolving understanding of the people they served. Grogan (1991) argued that providing culturally appropriate education for low-income and minority clientele is essential for the survival and development of the Extension profession. Current findings provide some evidence for the effectiveness of the Cooperative Extension model (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2011). Agents that interact with people in their communities can develop awareness of community needs and then meet those needs with university resources. Like most professionals, agents have a variety of job responsibilities.

Agents indicated that they recognized their responsibility to provide appropriate programming for all members of their respective communities, including minority populations.

One conclusion that can be drawn from the shared experiences of these agents could be that they had passion. This was evidenced as they described their experiences in identifying unique needs of low-income and diverse populations, finding ways to meet these needs, offering flexibility in implementing programming, and finally making all of this possible because of their ongoing and ever-changing knowledge about their own communities. Passion is implied in the

time agents spent learning about and adjusting to the differences of these populations, developing partnerships and collaborations, learning new ways of recruiting these audiences, and sometimes addressing language differences. Providing RE for low-income and diverse populations was personal because agents worked and lived in these communities. Further, passion is indicated in agents' willingness to add more to their responsibilities to meet the needs of these community members. Agents acknowledged the challenges and difficulties in providing RE for low-income and diverse audiences, but seemingly kept their focus on the good the programming could accomplish.

A phenomenological design attempts to understand the lived and shared experience with a specific phenomenon (van Manen, 1990). This qualitative research design can be described as a pre-theoretical approach because the focus is on understanding the lived experience, not testing hypotheses or theoretical tenants. Findings from this phenomenological study appear to be closely related to the tenants of intervention theory, which is based on the interplay between risk and protective factors (Coie et al., 1993). Risk factors have the potential to lead to personal dysfunction unless intervention is provided using protective factors. Participants from low-income households have been found to have a number of risk factors. For example, low-income couples have been found to have lower relationship stability (Conger, Conger, & Martin, 2010), and individuals from low-income households have increased levels of substance abuse, depression, and incarceration (Ooms & Wilson, 2004). Providing RE may improve resistance to these risk factors or to the symptoms of dysfunction. It is apparent in the current analysis that the agents recognized the unique needs of low-income and diverse populations. Consistent with intervention theory, creativity in recruitment is posited as a necessity to recruit difficult-to-reach populations. Agents consistently talked about how creative approaches were more successful than traditional recruitment procedures. Intervention theory also states that programs should be culturally appropriate. Agents commonly talked about the cultural appropriateness of the RE in the facilitation, planning, and implementation processes. Hughes (1994) indicated that RE is strengthened when it is informed by a theoretical framework. It appears that agents implicitly used tenants of intervention theory when providing RE in their communities. Intervention theory may be considered as a strong framework for community educators seeking to provide RE for low-income and diverse populations.

## Implications

Based on the findings from the current study, implications are discussed in terms of facilitating, planning, and implementation of RE for low-income and diverse populations. Sampling from Cooperative Extension provided a consistent, professional setting that allowed for implications that may be relevant to community facilitators in general who want to provide

RE for underserved populations. Although the implications are divided into specific categories, it is acknowledged that there is some overlap and that each category is influenced by the other two.

## Facilitating Relationship Education

The findings imply that facilitators of RE for minority populations should develop a strong commitment or passion for this goal. Facilitators may develop this passion by spending time acquainting themselves with the ethnic and economic composition of their community. One suggestion is to spend time interacting with the target populations in locations where they frequent (Skogrand, 2004). This can lead to an increased understanding of the needs in the population that is being targeted. Time spent in the community—as was evident in this study's third major theme—will also create visibility and open the opportunity to develop partnerships within the population.

Using collaborations can be one way to ensure the appropriateness of curriculums and provide opportunities to identify qualified educators from the target population. Skogrand (2004) suggested that a representative or "cultural guide" from the selected target group can provide additional clarification and direction. The cultural guide can represent a formal or informal relationship, depending on the individual's willingness to provide instruction about his or her culture (Skogrand & Shirer, 2007). Results from this study indicate that an understanding of cultural appropriateness continually develops as facilitators interact with the participants. Facilitators should recognize the heterogeneity among cultural groups and ensure that programs are responsive to the values of the participants.

## Planning Relationship Education

Agents talked about developing different mindsets when planning RE for low-income and diverse populations. Facilitators providing RE for target populations should identify participant needs and identify ways to meet these needs. Practical considerations that emerged from this study include forming partnerships with organizations that have relationships with these populations and identifying culturally sensitive curricula and educators. One of the major challenges in providing education for low-income and diverse couples is accessibility to these populations (Coie et al., 1993; Ooms & Wilson, 2004; Robertson et al., 2006). Collaborating with organizations (e.g., community organizations, religious organizations) that already provide services for the target group is one suggested way to decrease this challenge (Ooms & Wilson; Skogrand & Shirer, 2007; Wiley & Ebata, 2004).

The current data confirm the benefits of working with organizations that have already developed trusting relationships and reputations with these less-accessible populations.

Identifying these community organizations may be a good starting point for community facilitators interested in providing RE for underserved populations. Word-of-mouth recruitment and providing incentives (e.g., a meal, child care, or cash) were also successful techniques as reported by agents. Some of these techniques can be expensive, but the current results suggest that they encourage attendance.

**Implementing Relationship Education**

Providing RE for low-income and diverse populations can be time consuming. Developing and maintaining collaborations are important for the progress of the education program, but are recognized as time commitments themselves. Flexibility with collaborators is essential, recognizing that they can assist in multiple areas of providing RE. Flexibility in general is necessary because not all RE implementation will go as planned. Having a backup plan for facilitation, readiness to host more people than originally anticipated, and willingness to find creative solutions to challenges were found to be important examples of flexibility in this study. Important aspects of implementation include precisely how and what RE information is presented to participants. Agents used either curricula designed for a specific cultural group or existing curricula that were adapted to meet the needs of the target group. In either instance, agents indicated their awareness of the unique cultural values and characteristics of their target audiences. Again, using a cultural guide or developing collaboration with a organization that already provides services for diverse and low-income populations could ensure that RE is implemented in a sensitive way (Skogrand, 2004).

**Limitations and Future Directions**

The current study was designed to investigate the phenomenon of providing RE for low-income and diverse populations. Although many of the findings were consistent with existing general recommendations for providing RE for these populations, the experiences may be unique to the agents in this study. The 14 agents were predominately female, Caucasian, and lived and worked in a largely Caucasian Western state. Findings may be considerably different in states with more ethnic diversity and with facilitators from different ethnicities. Also, Cooperative Extension agents receive support, training, and assistance in providing RE in their counties from their land-grant institution. Educators from different agencies or organizations may not have the same resources available to them in providing RE within their communities.

Despite the apparent limitations, this study serves as a step forward in understanding the process of providing RE for low-income and diverse populations. The shared experiences of agents in this study provide some much-needed validity for preexisting suggestions concerning effective practices in providing RE for underserved populations. This study also highlights the

necessity of community educator passion to flexibly face the challenges associated with providing RE for diverse and low-income populations. Another important contribution of this study is a process perspective that identifies the importance of an intimate and evolving understanding of community ethnic/socioeconomic compositions and needs. This study proves to be a beginning step in understanding the considerations that are necessary to facilitate, plan, and implement RE with low-income and diverse populations. Future research is encouraged to qualitatively and quantitatively evaluate the practices of providing RE from this study in diverse contexts. Agents' collaborative responses in this study show that it is possible to reach and provide RE for low-income populations and have rewarding experiences in the process.

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