

Dissemination of Empirically Supported Approaches with the Potential to
Strengthen Marriage among African American Populations:
Experiences from the Program for Strong African American Marriages

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In this article, we discuss general observations about successful delivery of culturally sensitive variations of empirically grounded strategies for relationship enhancement and divorce prevention. This discussion focuses on the importance of religious traditions in culturally sensitive marriage enrichment services. In particular, we highlight our ongoing investigation of the Program for Strong African American Marriages (ProSAAM) and share some of our experiences in disseminating ProSAAM to communities in northeast Georgia.

As intervention providers continue to explore ways to enhance their programs, a direct focus on dissemination issues is of critical importance. Clearly, access to prevention programs and marital therapy differ across regions of the country and among ethnic groups. Dissemination is particularly important for African Americans, who are under-served by typical means of health care delivery. Rural African American families tend to be skeptical of the benefits to be derived from mental health services; therefore, they are not likely to advocate for these services in their communities (Brody, Flor, & Stoneman, 1996; Murry & Brody, 2004). Reasons for this reluctance include mistrust of medical researchers, contextual factors such as a lack of transportation or means to pay for services, and culturally irrelevant programs (Murry, Kotchick, et al., 2004). African Americans also have the highest therapy dropout rate of all ethnic groups (Sue, Zane, & Young, 1994). For these reasons, establishing trust and offering programs that take into consideration the racial, socioeconomic, and regional characteristics of the populations they serve are critical to effective program delivery.

Among African American couples, religiosity and church involvement predict relationship quality (Brody & Flor, 1996; Taylor et al., 1999), suggesting that this population is more likely to respond favorably to relationship enhancement programs if those programs encourage couples to draw upon their religious practices. Historically, religious participation has been an important survival strategy for African Americans. During enslavement, a strong

religious orientation served as a framework for preserving family values and overcoming staggering experiences of injustice in a dehumanizing environment. This legacy of spirituality and religious involvement has been passed down through generations, remaining constant over time, location, and context as a part of the fabric of African American culture (Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004). For many African Americans, cultivating a relationship with God remains the ultimate source of inspiration and guidance (McAdoo, 1983; Taylor & Chatters, 1991). For this reason, religiosity plays a significant role in predicting family outcomes in African American populations.

Several key research concepts helped us to incorporate religious elements into a culturally sensitive intervention designed to minimize the effects of discrimination on African American couples. First, we noted the link between prayer and dealing with adversities such as health problems (Dunn & Horgas, 2000; Ellison, 1998). Second, we examined the growing body of research on religious forms of coping and the potential for religiously based coping to facilitate adjustment and well-being (Ellison, 1991) and to reduce depression (Williams, Larson, Buckler, Heckman, & Pyle, 1991). Third, we reviewed studies that integrated religious practice with standard practices in psychotherapy (Tan, 1987) and marriage enrichment (Stanley et al., 2001). Finally, because experiences with discrimination are emotionally disruptive to African Americans (Murry et al., 2001), we focused on materials that explicitly help spouses support one another in responding to discrimination.

Our incorporation of religious material and prayer into ProSAAM was one means of creating a culturally sensitive vehicle for relationship enhancement that would be familiar and appealing to the participants while keeping the program consistent with established intervention guidelines. In addition, emphasizing programs that really work and that have a strong skill-based component is a good way to connect with African American communities. We based ProSAAM on PREP, allowing us to discuss with community leaders the strong empirical foundation that PREP brings to relationship enhancement. ProSAAM also explicitly incorporates African American religious traditions and values, allowing couples who wish to do so the opportunity to learn relationship skills in the context of their religious beliefs and prayer.

Our experiences with church officials and other African American community leaders raised important issues to be considered in effectively disseminating programs among African Americans. Our ongoing ProSAAM trial began with a meeting of a focus group that included 12

African American husbands and fiancés. Some of the group's discussions focused on personal preferences for the program's structure, whereas others underscored the value of the church as a recruitment source and the pastor's endorsement as an incentive for couples to take part in the program. As one focus group member said,

You've got to work with the churches. The churches are key. That's where it all begins for most married people, ya'know, in the church. That's where we not only begin our marriages, but it's where we come to learn more about how to stay married and be husbands and wives.

Another group member noted,

You're going to need someone to endorse the program because marriages are so personal...Bottom line, it's a real incentive to us if the pastor endorses it.

The focus group thus gave us a strong and consistent message that we should have their pastors evaluate the program and endorse it from the pulpit before we offered it to congregation members. We revised the program and our recruitment plans in response to the group's suggestions and the community's needs. Consequently, we formulated ways in which to work more closely with African American church leaders. We developed a packet of materials designed to introduce ProSAAM to pastors and pulpit associates. This helped us to connect with over 100 churches, and we developed partnerships with many of these congregations. One particularly successful means of developing partnerships was a reception for area pastors that we called An Evening of P.R.A.I.S.E.—prayer, recruitment, advertisement, information, sponsorship, and endorsement, the six ways in which we asked pastors to support ProSAAM. The reception featured a catered meal and a presentation that introduced the church officials and their spouses to ProSAAM. After the presentation, we answered questions, took suggestions for ways to improve the program, and met with each church official individually to discuss the formation of partnerships with them and their congregations. The reception's success was grounded in the opportunity it gave us to make clear to the clergy that we valued their input and desired their feedback. The pastors, many of whom knew each other, appreciated the opportunity to socialize while learning about an exciting program that used prayer and skills to enhance marriages. After establishing partnerships with clergy, we were often invited and sometimes requested to attend church meetings, Bible studies, worship services, and other

church events to meet, network with, and inform congregations about ProSAAM and recruit couples into the program.

Pastoral endorsements proved critical to recruitment, which skyrocketed after we obtained the pastors' approval. Couples, particularly husbands and fiancés who were initially skeptical about participating, were willing and even excited about taking part in the program. After completing the program, a 40-year-old man said,

It really helped broaden my listening skills and it gave me useful information on how to keep an argument from escalating. I would suggest that all African-American couples, especially men, take part in ProSAAM. I think it would be particularly beneficial to couples who are engaged. It could teach them how to start off with good listening skills and how to give non-critical advice. The program not only helps you be a better husband, it also helps you be a better father and a better man in general.

In their interactions with us, pastors often expressed their excitement about the program and noted as they pledged their support that strong churches *begin with* strong families. Many of those whose churches had been affected by weak or broken marital bonds said that they wanted to strengthen marriage within the African American community and were enthusiastic about the role of prayer in building better marriages. Pastors who wanted to offer their congregations a marriage ministry or a culture-specific enrichment alternative welcomed ProSAAM as an effective step toward their goals.

Our experiences thus far have led us to identify particular steps in our efforts to disseminate ProSAAM to the African American community. The first step is to identify and solicit input from community stakeholders and local leaders. A good example of a stakeholder is a pastor whom the community perceives as energetic, progressive, and willing to embrace new approaches. With this pastor's endorsement, couples may be inspired to participate in an initial program. Their participation becomes the start of the second wave. As the first couples who take part in the program report a positive experience, their grass-roots endorsement combines with advertising to prompt other couples to enroll in the program as well. As the program becomes more widely accepted and trusted, initially reluctant couples may decide to participate. This snowball effect suggests that widespread dissemination will likely proceed in stages.

In summary, as efficacious programs become increasingly available, it will be important to create culturally sensitive approaches that allow them to be disseminated to the people who

need them most. Our experience with African American couples suggests that religion plays an important role in effective dissemination of programs to this population. It is therefore important to work effectively with pastors and church leaders to receive their approval, generate enthusiasm for the program, and ultimately gain their endorsement. The desire for efficacious approaches to strengthening marriages, particularly skill-based programs, is very strong in the communities in which we have been working (see also Karney, Garvan, & Thomas, 2003; Stanley & Trathen, 1994). For behaviorally oriented marital researchers who are able to master the necessary community interaction and dissemination skills, a program is available that is likely to be quite well accepted and very helpful in African American community development.

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