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## BRIEF REPORT

# Engaging African American Men in Empirically Based Marriage Enrichment Programs: Lessons From Two Focus Groups on the ProSAAM Project

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To better meet the needs of eligible African American men who were reluctant to enroll in a 5-year study called the Program for Strong African American Marriages (ProSAAM), we employed two focus groups to listen to the voices of a sample of the population being recruited and to explore their feedback about taking part in such a marriage enrichment program and how best to recruit other African American men. We explain our application of the focus group results to our recruitment of African American married couples for ProSAAM. The positive outcomes from the implementation of these results can provide potential ideas for those seeking innovative means to improve recruitment of African American men to programs that strengthen marital relationships.

*Keywords:* marriage, African American, men, recruitment

## Background

The significance of recruiting African American families in research programs has been a concern for psychologists. Special

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consideration of such factors (e.g., cultural mistrust, barriers to participation) could help psychologists identify important avenues to improve program service delivery (Bryant et al., 2010). Among men, in particular, they are frequently taught that to engage in help-seeking behavior or to seek counseling is indicative of an admission of needing assistance, and hence, a sign of weakness and being unable to solve one's own problems (Smith, 2002; Williams & Justice, 2010). Indeed, early in our recruitment of the participants for the Program for Strong African American Marriages (ProSAAM), a 5-year intervention study, we noticed a particular reluctance among African American men to enroll (for more information, visit <http://www.uga.edu/prosaam>). Because the eligibility criteria required couples to enroll, we needed to find out more on the key factors in the men's hesitation about participating in order to develop effective strategies to recruit them. Thus, we conducted two focus groups in order to explore more about the African American men's concerns about participating in such a marriage enrichment program.

## Method

We recruited 12 married African American men to share their views about the program. In November 2005, the men were recruited through community contacts and an announcement on a listserv for faculty and staff at the University of Georgia. To qualify for the focus group, the men met the following criteria: (a) be married or engaged at the time of the focus group; (b) self-identify as an African American; and (c) be willing to share their perspectives about a culturally sensitive marriage enrichment program. Interested men informed the research team by phone or e-mail of their interest in taking part in the focus group. Upon their

arrival at the research center to participate in the focus group, they were served dinner, and paid \$50.00 for their participation.

The sample size was 12. All the men identified themselves as African American; all were currently married at the time of the focus group. The sample mean age was 35 (range 26–50; see Table 1). The mean level of education was some college or technical school (range high school diploma to advanced degree). On average, the men reported individual incomes in the \$40,000–49,999 category (range \$10,000–19,999 to \$70,000 or more) and an average household income of \$50,000–59,999 (range from \$30,000–39,999 to \$70,000 or more). On average, the men had one biological child (range 0–3). They had been together with their wives (including dating and marriage) for an average of 15 years (range 6–27 years). On average, the men had been married 7 years (range 1–22).

Two African American male facilitators—both partnered, neither married—attended a 1-hr training prior to the focus group meeting to obtain guidance on the focus group protocol. After the facilitator training, the 12 men were separated into two groups of six; each group was led by one facilitator. The facilitators introduced themselves and presented the topic of discussion: participation in a program for couples to strengthen their marriage. The facilitators reviewed the Informed Consent and obtained signatures from all men; the study was conducted in compliance with the University of Georgia’s Institutional Review Board. The facilitators asked the men about motivating factors for participating in a marital enrichment program, strategies to foster enthusiasm about such a program, barriers to taking part in the program, and comments on the program format and structure. The focus group discussions were recorded digitally. Four observing graduate students took notes while the men in the groups talked, in order to ensure that the discussion themes were captured. After the focus group session, the facilitators and graduate students discussed with the research team their perceptions of the group discussions. Gaining different perspectives about the focus group discussions enabled the authors to confirm that the data were reliable.

The research team analyzed the content of the focus group discussions to identify themes in the data. Through the process of conventional content analysis, themes were derived directly from the data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Content analysis was selected in order to identify similarities and differences in the themes that

emerged from the data. In the process of reviewing the digital recordings and focus group notes, we reached conclusions about common themes in the men’s perspectives on the marriage program and how to recruit African American men to it.

The results of our analyses are as follows. First, the men, being already overcommitted with work and family responsibilities, stated that they were unwilling to commit to attending a marital enrichment program. The program would meet one full Saturday for the first session and one half Saturday for the second, with 1 month of skills practice in between. Second, the men acknowledged how much they would appreciate connecting with a mentor, someone they could obtain sound advice from about being a husband. Third, the men underscored the importance of securing a program endorsement from a male who had been married for a long time and was viewed as having an upstanding lifestyle. From their perspective, it would be preferable to identify this person through churches. Next, we outline the implementation of the focus group suggestions for the ProSAAM project.

## Implementation of Focus Group Results

### Program Format

We changed the program format from one full Saturday and one half Saturday with 1 month of skills practice to three Saturday mornings with 2 weeks of skills practice between each session. The research team also spent more time refining the available services for couples, including monetary incentives, free child care for dependent children and elderly relatives, complimentary transportation, and a free breakfast and lunch (Yancey, Ortega, & Kumanyika, 2006). We paid careful attention to the locations selected for the educational programs (e.g., Boys and Girls Clubs, hotels, buildings on university campuses), ensuring they were centrally located and easy to access from major thoroughfares (Cooney, Small, & O’Connor, 2007). We shied away from using free-of-charge facilities at churches to reduce the likelihood that participants would have reservations about participating in the program at worship centers of different denominations from their own.

Table 1  
*Sample Demographics (n = 12)*

Participants	Age	Education	Individual income	Household income	Number of biological children	Number of years in relationship with wife	Number of years married
1	34	Some college	\$20,000–\$29,999	\$50,000–\$59,999	3	17	8
2	30	Some college	\$10,000–\$19,999	\$50,000–\$59,999	0	7	2
3	26	Some college	\$30,000–\$39,999	\$70,000 or more	1	6	1
4	29	Some college	\$30,000–\$39,999	\$50,000–\$59,999	0	13	8
5	50	College degree	\$50,000–\$59,999	\$50,000–\$59,999	0	27	22
6	31	Advanced degree	\$60,000–\$69,999	\$70,000 or more	0	10	5
7	39	Advanced degree	\$70,000 or more	\$70,000 or more	2	16	10
8	28	High school diploma	\$70,000 or more	\$70,000 or more	3	11	6
9	42	Some college	\$20,000–\$29,999	\$40,000–\$49,999	0	10	2
10	42	Advanced degree	\$70,000 or more	\$70,000 or more	2	26	8
11	35	College degree	\$40,000–\$49,999	\$70,000 or more	2	19	4
12	40	Some college	\$20,000–\$29,999	\$30,000–\$39,999	0	20	15

## Mentorship

We relied on the men who were employed in the program to serve in the role of male ambassador, which were used to inform, recruit, and retain any eligible or enrolled men who were deemed reluctant or unsure about their participation. Male project personnel were successful in their attempts to speak to disinterested men about the importance of their involvement in such a marriage enrichment program and persuade them to participate (Hill et al., 1999).

In an attempt to provide the men with more one-on-one time with their same-gender facilitator, we separated the men and women for lunch. Men and women were able to dine without their spouses or fiancés/fiancées to discuss issues that might be salient for mates in a gender-exclusive setting. Participants used the time to mentor one another about successes in their marriages as well as provide testimonies to one another about how they triumphed over tribulation in difficult seasons of their relationships. The men, in particular, engaged in fellowship and found comfort in knowing that their marital struggles were common. Prior to the program, many men, especially those only married a few years, felt unsure about their situation. Other men assured them that their concerns were valid, normal, and expected. These discussions proved significant for establishing a supportive marriage community among the mates. During this time, they also had the chance to learn more about the facilitator's marital experiences and to ask questions about the skills or materials that were presented.

## Faith-Based Partnerships

In light of the focus group results, we worked diligently to partner with faith-based organizations. Our curriculum specifically attended to the significance of spirituality and religion within the African American community, and in so doing, we were better able to offer a marriage enrichment program that was culturally sensitive. We advocated for the use of prayer in marriage as a way to calm couples and help them refocus before, during, and after conflict (Dunn & Horgas, 2000). We combined the practice of prayer with a program that had a strong empirical foundation, the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP). In sum, through the incorporation of prayer into ProSAAM, we were able to offer a culturally sensitive vehicle for marital enrichment and allow couples to learn communication and problem-solving skills in the context of their own spiritual beliefs.

It was also important to meet with pastors and marriage ministry leaders one-on-one and allow them to evaluate and critique the program. Our ultimate goal was to secure a commitment from the pastor to endorse our program from the pulpit as one way of advertising it to their congregants. Toward this goal, we first developed a "church packet," which included an array of ProSAAM materials and a cover letter that we mailed to contacts. In addition to the church packet, we adopted a second strategy to reach the leaders of predominantly African American congregations, by organizing a reception for area pastors and ministerial leaders. Hosted by an area minister, this event was called "An Evening of PRAISE." PRAISE stood for the six ways in which we asked pastors to partner with ProSAAM—prayer, recruitment, advertisement, information, sponsorship, and endorsement. This event was particularly successful and helped us to make contact

with key church leaders. Following dinner, the project leaders delivered a presentation that introduced ProSAAM's mission to invited guests. At the conclusion of the presentation, the project leaders fielded questions, received suggestions for program improvements, and met individually with each church official to discuss a plan for working with their congregation (e.g., pastor and spouse would participate in ProSAAM to obtain a first-hand experience, marriage ministry leaders would review program materials). After the partnership was established, church officials often requested a team member to attend their church meetings, Bible studies, worship services, and other church events to offer information about ProSAAM to congregants. It proved critical to ensure that all members of the research team were cross-trained and equipped with information to enroll couples and to ensure that someone from the team would always be available to respond to these invitations (sometimes last minute) to recruit couples.

The pastors also voiced their reservations about the program. For example, none felt comfortable endorsing the program from the pulpit when the program had age restrictions on who could participate, thereby excluding some congregants. As a result, we modified our approach and welcomed all married and engaged persons in their congregations to take part in the educational program sessions (as a community service), but we only enrolled those who met the marital eligibility requirements to participate in the research study. In another example, pastors wished to know more about the motivating factors for studying African American families, in particular. They cited the infamous Tuskegee experiment and raised historical challenges in the relationship between the University of Georgia and the African American community. In order to allay their concerns and clearly lay out the rationale for the program, we created a document called the Spirit of ProSAAM (see project website).

Overall, church officials were excited about the program and enthusiastic about its use of prayer to build better marriages. Pastors pledged their support, noting that strong churches begin with strong families. Pastors who wished to strengthen their existing marriage ministries or use ProSAAM as a springboard to organize a marriage ministry welcomed the program as a step toward their goals for their ministry. As predicted by our focus group participants, endorsements from the pastor and key pulpit officials proved to be a catalyst for recruitment; as an institution, the church represented a trusted and respected organization in the community for the couples (Cooney et al., 2007). When pastors were unable to speak about the program from the pulpit, they used other means to advertise the program (e.g., mailing a signed letter to their congregants, placing an announcement in the church bulletin). Couples, especially husbands and fiancés, many of whom were reluctant to take part in the program, were willing to give it a try with a pastor's endorsement. Not only was recruitment enhanced, but each endorsement also bolstered our credibility in the community and served to reduce mistrust and concern among eligible participants. The endorsement of our program by pastors and ministerial leaders was undoubtedly key for recruitment, which has been corroborated in previous work (LaTaillade, 2006; Stanley, 2004; Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004; Wisdom, Neighbors, Williams, Havstad, & Tilley, 2002).

To close, our research team's work with the Program for Strong African American sample draws on the importance of religion in the lives of African American married persons (Bryant et al., 2010;

Pew Charitable Trust, 2009). Though the faith-based recruitment was successful, participating couples were recruited from other sources as well. The sample should not be viewed as a religious one; no participants were screened out because of their lack of religious involvement (Beach et al., 2011; Hurt, in press). Participants represented a range of Christian denominations and Islamic traditions with varying theological commitments; efforts were made to welcome all participants regardless of their particular faiths and beliefs. The program was offered with a spirit of inclusiveness toward all religious orientations (Beach et al., 2011).

### Conclusion

In sum, our experiences have taught us valuable lessons about disseminating ProSAAM. We first learned the significance of soliciting input from community stakeholders, which had been previously achieved by our colleagues at the Center for Family Research (Murry & Brody, 2004). After modifying our recruitment approach in the ways previously described, we were able to attract nearly 400 married African American couples to participate in the ProSAAM project. In contrast to our initial efforts, we found our modified recruitment strategies to be much more effective, particularly with African American males. This suggested that the lessons we learned from the focus groups were pertinent to the specific issue of engaging African American men in research on marriage. We found that these men were much more likely to view a marriage enhancement program as legitimate and potentially useful if it was endorsed by a known figure in the community, particularly male religious leaders. This may also reflect the value of using male African American recruiters to recruit men into the program. Similarly, we found that testimonials from early participants in the project were valuable in recruiting later participants. We also found that implementing the recommendations for ProSAAM were effective in increasing potential participants' enthusiasm for this marriage-strengthening program.

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