

## RESEARCH CORNER

Steven R. H. Beach, PhD, Editor

*Strengthening interventions for the increasingly diverse array of families presenting for intervention and prevention programs requires a foundation of research that is inclusive. Otherwise, we cannot be sure that our empirically grounded interventions generalize to a wide range of cultural and ethnic contexts. In this research corner article, Dr. Tera Hurt describes strategies and approaches for connecting with African American families and engaging them in intervention programs. The suggestions are likely to be of interest to many researchers. Similar strategies may be effective for those planning community level intervention efforts as well.*

—Steven R. H. Beach

### Connecting with African American Families: Challenges and Possibilities

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The importance of connecting with African American families in research programs is a topic of increasing interest both for researchers and funding agencies. One reason for the increased interest is the Public Service Act of 1990 (Section 492B), which strongly encouraged the inclusion of minorities (and women) in federally-funded research initiatives. Prior to this legislation, researchers made relatively little effort to include minority participants. In some cases, this was because they were either concerned about decreasing internal validity or fearful that they would need to block on race and so be faced with reduced statistical power. However, in other cases, researchers were simply unfamiliar with successful strategies for recruiting and retaining sizable sub-samples of African Americans into their studies and were daunted by the effort before they even began. Since 1990, much greater attention has been placed on attracting African Americans to research projects, and investigators have written about their successes and failures in this regard. The growing level of sophistication regarding community engagement and retention has led to increased research involving African American respondents over the past 15 years.

Despite the gains that have been made, as family scientists, we should continue to be alert to the need for continued efforts to develop successful strategies for working with African American families. This area of discussion will remain significant for several reasons. First, African Americans

are the second largest minority group in the United States and represent about 13% of the U.S. population. Second, there is a great deal of heterogeneity among African Americans that frequently goes unnoticed or unappreciated. Good research on African American families requires enhanced attention to the nuances of African American life, and the impact of differing contexts including (but not limited to) region, income, and age. Third, as we strive to achieve President Tom Sexton's vision of "making practices more accessible, [we must] explore the unique needs and challenges of culturally and ethnically diverse clients." Scholarly discussions and in-the-field experiences will contribute to uncovering subtle, yet important nuances in involving African Americans in research programs. These activities and insights will play an important role in helping family scientists strengthen research agendas, enhance modes of service delivery, and connect with key individuals in community settings. Finally, because African American families confront unique challenges and stresses, our theories of family functioning can be greatly enriched by attention to African American families.

A first step toward greater inclusion is to understand the barriers that keep participants out of our research projects. The literature on community engagement has identified numerous barriers in connecting with African Americans and engaging African American families in research. Logistical hurdles commonly prevent African Americans from enrolling in and/or remaining in research programs. Eligible respondents cite the following obstacles

as impediments to their participation in studies: lack of transportation to research site, coping with life stressors (i.e., health problems, life crises), lack of child care, and an inability to participate because of hectic schedules (i.e., work, parenting, other commitments) (Byrd, 2006; Carey, Kinsinger, Keyserling, & Harris, 1996; Corbie-Smith, Thomas, Williams, & Moody-Ayers, 1999; Fitzgibbon, et al., 1998; Gorelick, Harris, Burnett, & Bonecutter, 1998; Patrick, Pruchno, & Rose, 1998; Swanson & Ward, 1995). In overcoming these difficulties, researchers must be prepared to provide support services to their clients to encourage and foster their research involvement. In addition to monetary incentives, critical services often include child care, transportation, and meals. On the other hand, in working with more affluent African American couples, different strategies may be required. In working with busy working couples in northeast Georgia and metropolitan Atlanta, my research team found it helpful to use the Internet to post helpful information about our programs online, and also to provide ways for couples to communicate with us. In the Program for Strong African American Marriages and the Promoting Strong Families programs, my research team used online scheduling and evaluations systems which allowed our couples to conduct project business like scheduling data collection interviews and rating their in-home educational program sessions at their convenience.

Sociocultural barriers have also been widely noted among scholars that have worked

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in African American communities (Byrd, 2006; Fitzgibbon et al., 1998; Hautman & Bomar, 1995; Meinert, Blehar, Peindl, & Neal-Barnett, 2003; Sadler, Peterson, & Wasserman, 2005; Corbie-Smith, Thomas, Williams, & Moody-Ayers, 1999; Swanson & Ward, 1995). Grave ethical violations of the past, like the infamous Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Black Man, dating back to 1932, coupled with a legacy of historical and contemporary discriminatory experiences, foster a sense of distrust, fear, and skepticism among African Americans about research. For this reason, it is not uncommon for African Americans to initially have negative attitudes about research and to be wary of researchers' motives in recruiting them.

Entrenched mistrust of the research community and their intentions represents a serious barrier for researchers, but one that can be overcome with careful planning and attention. First, it is important to build and cultivate a research team that either reflects the community you intend to serve, or is well-known and respected in the community of interest. In my experience with two large-scale survey projects involving over 700 African American couples, I found that inclusiveness begins with the research team. My successes in the field have been attributable to the composition of the recruitment and engagement teams, and their ability to be seen as credible and trustworthy spokespersons for the project. After being trained in the program's purpose, goals, and design, the recruitment team members went out into the community speaking to potential participants in their own style (commonly laying research language aside), endorsing the program, responding to skepticism and concerns from the community, and appealing to eligible adults' sense of community, family, and heritage (National Healthy Marriage Resource Center, 2008; Yancey, McCarthy, & Leslie, 1998). It is also important to recruit research assistants, who see their involvement in the program as more than "just a job." I looked for those who saw

the position as dovetailing with their own passion for building strong marriages and families within the community. Eligible research participants observed this passion, which further helped team members to present the program in a positive light and recruit participants. Placing an ethnically-representative team on the front lines also demonstrates awareness of, and sensitivity to, the cultural background of would-be participants (Fitzgibbon et al., 1998; McCurdy & Daro, 2001).

Second, it is important to court the community and to be creative in crafting your message while simultaneously being transparent in presenting your program and your goals. These considerations suggest that every research project targeting ethnic minorities also is a public relations campaign. In this public relations campaign, all forms of advertisements can be helpful in making eligible participants aware of your program—from mass media, to partnering with agencies that have a complementary mission, to using currently enrolled participants to identify other routes of recruiting and advertising (Fitzgibbon et al., 1998; Swanson & Ward, 1995; Wisdom, Neighbors, Williams, Havstad, & Tilley, 2002). Once a creative message is introduced, it is important that eligible participants be able to receive honest and open feedback about what they may experience in your program. In working within the African American community and trying to overcome likely concerns, the best policy is to present your program in a simple, organized fashion for the consumer. All important details should be presented so that you have the best chance of gaining trust and buy-in for recruitment. In my own experience, having information available in multiple formats (i.e., on-line, brochures, handouts, word-of-mouth, mass media) was useful for creating a sense of partnership with the community and overcoming mistrust.

Third, it has been exceedingly important to partner with key stakeholders. The research team's successes in attracting and recruiting couples to our program are attributable to taking a multi-faced

approach to recruitment, enrollment, and retention, as outlined by Gorelick and colleagues (1998). Based on early focus group work with African American men—commonly, the more difficult mate to recruit in a couple—we discovered that effective recruitment would require us to secure the endorsement of men that they respected. In our community context, deep in the Southeast, the men overwhelmingly noted their pastors and ministerial leaders as men whose endorsement would be respected, a point echoed by other family scientists (Carter-Edwards, Fisher, Vaughn, & Svetkey, 2002; Fitzgibbon et al., 1998; Hautman & Bomar, 1995; LaTailade, 2006; Stanley, 2004; Tuggle, 1995; Wisdom, Neighbors, Williams, Havstad, & Tilley, 2002). The significance of pastors and other ministerial leaders in the community reflects, in part, the high regard for spirituality and religious involvement among African Americans that has been passed down through generations, is a part of the fabric of the culture, and remains constant over time, location, and context (Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004).

Based on these focus group results, my research team embarked upon a strong campaign to seek the *endorsement* from notable ministerial leaders in communities in which we were working. These efforts centered on hosting receptions, preparing mailings, and attending meetings; these efforts have been outlined in greater detail elsewhere (Hurt et al., 2008). In gaining key endorsements, the research team emphasized the importance of building strong marriages for sustaining church congregations, providing optimal environments for child-rearing, and cultivating healthy communities and neighborhoods. Leaders of faith-based organizations were provided with opportunities to comment on our program and curriculum, and to suggest modifications when changes would not compromise the integrity of the research. The research team also emphasized developing long-term partnerships with congregations to demonstrate a long-term investment in a specific ministry. Many ministerial leaders responded by endorsing the program from the pulpit, by letter, through a church

bulletin, or by providing access to members' contact information contained in church rosters and directories. These efforts resulted in fruitful avenues for recruitment, as well as retention. Equally important, each endorsement increased our credibility in the community and decreased residual mistrust and concern among eligible couples.

Partnering with faith-based organizations has been a natural extension of our efforts to engage the community and focus on strengthening marriages and parenting among African American couples. These organizations are well-suited to enhance individuals' spiritual and religious resources, and in turn, increase resilience in coping with notable risk factors in the marital dyad and at the family-level (Stanley, 2004). Most importantly, such institutions have been fundamental to family life as an important source of coping, strength, and support and are often embedded in communities where families reside (LaTaillade, 2006; Stanley, 2004). Not surprisingly, the link among religion, couple satisfaction, and family well-being for African Americans has been well-established in the literature (LaTaillade, 2006; Taylor, Mattis, & Chatters, 1999). In particular, church involvement and religiosity predict relationship quality (Brody & Flor, 1996; Taylor, Mattis, & Chatters, 1999). Because faith-based organizations have tended to be very supportive of educational programs that foster healthy marriages, coupled with African American couples' desire for culturally sensitive approaches to strengthening marriages (Karney, Garvan, & Thomas, 2003), consideration should be given to the possibility of including spirituality in relationship enhancement programs that are targeted to the African American community (Stanley & Trathen, 1994).

Community engagement is an important topic and one that is thankfully receiving increased attention. There are many potential strategies for enhancing engagement and retention with African American families, some of which I discuss above. All successful approaches will share the common threads of respect, long-term commitment to the

community, and a transparent agenda that includes positive outcomes for African American families. To the extent that family researchers can integrate these threads into their own research programs, research on African American families should enter its most productive period ever.

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