

The Role of Participant-Facilitator Demographic Match in Couple and Relationship Education

Angela B. Bradford, Francesca Adler-Baeder, Scott A. Ketring, and Thomas A. Smith

Auburn University

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Address correspondence to Angela Bradford, MS, LMFT, Department of Human Development and Family Studies at Auburn University, 203 Spidle Hall, Auburn, AL 36849, USA. E-mail: angela.b.bradford@gmail.com

Abstract

Offerings of CRE in recent years have included more diverse populations of participants, as well as more diverse facilitators in community-based program delivery. As a result, the opportunity has emerged to examine contextual factors that may impact program effects. This study examines the relationship between participant-facilitator demographic match of ethnicity, sex, education, and relationship status on reported facilitator quality and program outcomes, as well as the relationship between facilitator quality and program outcomes. Results indicated that sex match was related to facilitator quality. Relationship status match was related to change in couple functioning, and education match was related to change in individual functioning. Additionally, facilitator quality was related to program outcomes. Findings suggest the value of adopting an additive approach to program implementation, in which facilitation quality/skills *and* similarity between participant and facilitator are considered.

Keywords: Couple/Marriage Education, Relationship Education, Demographic Match, Facilitator

Recently, advances have been made in the study of couple and relationship education (CRE) through the implementation and study of experiences among more diverse populations (Adler-Baeder et al., 2010; Hawkins & Fackrell, 2010; Stanley, Allen, Markman, Rhoades, & Prentice, 2010). Because studies in previous decades utilized mostly homogenous samples of married or premarital European American, middle class couples (Halford, Markman, & Stanley, 2008, Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2008), the focus was limited to assessments of program effects for the full sample of participants. With the increasing access to CRE for participants diverse in ethnicity and socio-economic status, opportunities to examine possible variations in experiences are available. In addition, previous university-based CRE programs offered limited variability in facilitator background. With the increase in CRE offerings for diverse populations, many programs involve community-based delivery by facilitators with more diverse backgrounds (Ooms & Wilson, 2004) and offer the opportunity to explore variations among facilitators. The use of an ecocultural lens (Phenice, Griffore, Hakoyama, & Silvey, 2009) involves the consideration of differing cultural contexts that may influence the program experience for individual participants and calls for investigations of intervening factors that can include characteristics of the participants, characteristics of the program facilitators, and combinations of these variables.

In studies of intervention, increasing attention is given to discussion of cultural differences as antecedents of change. As programs and research include more diverse populations, scholars assert that such characteristics as education, ethnicity, and sex are likely to have a significant impact on an individual's experience and suggest that these must be considered during intervention (see Hawkins, Carroll, Doherty, & Willoughby, 2004; LaRoche & Maxie, 2003; Ooms & Wilson, 2004; Phenice et al., 2009). Their assertions align with the

evidence in some clinical research that clients prefer a therapist who is similar in sex and ethnicity (Atkinson, Furlong, & Poston, 1986; Atkinson, Poston, Furlong, & Mercado, 1989; Atkinson & Lowe, 1995; Atkinson, Wampold, Matthews, & Ahn, 1998; Constantine, 2001) and may experience better outcomes when they have a therapist similar to themselves (Atkinson & Schein, 1986).

Recently, Higginbotham and Myler (2010) published the first study of CRE with more diverse participants and facilitators in which facilitator characteristics were explicitly examined as predictors of participants' assessments of facilitator and program quality. Rather than a straightforward examination of facilitator demographics, they assessed the "match" between participant and facilitator on several key variables (i.e., sex, ethnicity, and family structure). While they found that facilitation skills were the stronger predictors of facilitator and program quality ratings, demographic similarity did account uniquely for a portion of the variance in quality ratings. They found that men and women's global ratings of facilitator and program quality were predicted by experience similarity (i.e., current stepfamily experience). Group membership similarity (i.e., ethnicity and sex) was more predictive of facilitator and program quality ratings for men than for women. Men who were similar to their facilitators on ethnicity, and men and women who matched their facilitators' sex reported higher program quality. Additionally, men who were of a similar ethnicity to their facilitators reported higher facilitator quality; women did not.

Their study provides an important introduction to the study of facilitator characteristics. Vital next steps called for in their study include similar tests with other ethnic groups (i.e., their sample included European American and Latino participants) and importantly, the examination of the extent to which demographic match between facilitator and participant influences the

targeted changes in relational skills and quality. Our study extends this previous work, uses data from a diverse sample of African American and European American participants, and focuses on whether similarity between participant and facilitator on ethnicity, sex, education, and relationship status affects not only reports of facilitator/program quality, but also, program outcomes (i.e., individual and couple functioning).

Theoretical Assumptions

The “matching hypothesis” emphasizes the value of similarity between interventionist and participant in the promotion of positive changes (Jemmott, Jemmott, Fong, & McCaffree, 1999). The assumption is that greater match between practitioner and client will yield desirable outcomes. This assumption has been addressed for decades in multiple fields. For example, in dentistry, persuasive messages about the importance of proper dental care had a greater effect on African American junior high school students when delivered by an African American dentist (Dembroski, Lasater, & Ramirez, 1978). In social psychology, it has been noted that individuals are more apt to self-disclose to others who are similar to themselves (Archer, 1980; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). And, in business management, higher supervisor-subordinate demographic similarity has been linked to increased employee performance ratings (Turban & Jones, 1988).

The matching hypothesis was originally tested as a dating process and developed over the years as useful in other contexts (Hatfield & Sprecher, 2009). Specifically, in interventions, the matching hypothesis carries with it the implication that the greater the match between facilitator and participant, the greater the magnitude of intervention effects (e.g., Jemmott et al., 1999; Mazen & Leventhal, 1972). The extant literature on the matching hypothesis presents it as more of a descriptive theory and does not suggest in depth exploration or explanation of this effect, beyond suggesting that a simple preference or desire mediates the link between match and better

outcomes. We note that it is possible that this link may be explained by the related literature on cultural sensitivity. Family culture scholars assert that diverse families develop socially-constructed cultural identities, referred to as ecocultural niches, which shape families' experiences. They suggest that practitioners who are sensitive and responsive to these niches (i.e., "speak the same language") might be more well-received by participants and therefore, more effective intervening in culturally relevant ways (Phenice et al., 2009). A complementary concept can be found in social learning theory, which suggests that behaviors are learned through observation and imitation, or modeling (Bandura, 1977). Patterning thoughts or behaviors after a model (i.e., identification) is theorized to occur due to the observer's admiration of a model that is similar to him (Bandura, 1969). Like consumers of products marketed by characters similar to themselves, participants may assume attitudes and behaviors exemplified by their facilitators who are similar to them because they admire or feel connected to them. The implication is that positive affect and attitude toward the "similar other" develops and is an element of the process that contributes to change.

It is possible that greater intervention effects when participants and facilitators are matched is due not only to the greater receptivity of the participant to the intervention, but to the ability of facilitators who are similar to participants to understand their families' ecocultural niches and make useful adjustments to facilitation style and/or program delivery of content (i.e., to put content into a cultural context) (Phenice et al., 2009). In line with these theoretical assumptions, it has been suggested that specific family life education populations may benefit more from instruction by those who are similar to them in characteristic or experience (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Hawkins et al., 2004).

Previous Research

Although only one CRE study considers participant/facilitator similarity (Higginbotham & Myler, 2010), parallel studies in the clinical literature can be found, with mixed results, depending on the demographic dimension and group examined. Research indicates a preference for ethnically similar therapists among minorities (e.g., Lopez, Lopez, & Fong, 1991). In addition, Flicker, Waldron, Turner, Brody, and Hops (2008) examined the effects of ethnic matching on treatment outcome among substance-abusing adolescents in therapy. They found that Latin adolescents showed greater treatment gains when matched with Latin therapists than when matched with European American therapists. From the extant literature, however, there is a lack of a general consensus regarding the impact of ethnic matching on outcomes due to variability in questions asked, diverse methodological approaches, and mixed results (Karlsson, 2005).

When sex is considered, Fujino, Okazaki, and Young (1994) found that Asian American women were less likely to end therapy with their Asian American therapists prematurely (i.e., after one session) if they had a female therapist than if they had a male therapist. Conversely, in examinations of HIV risk reduction programs among African American adolescent males, Jemmott, Jemmott, and Fong (1992) did not find consistent advantages when participants were matched with African American facilitators of the same sex. Immediate post-program results indicated that African American males showed greater gains if they had a male facilitator, but 3-month follow up showed greater gains among those who had a female facilitator.

Early on in clinical work, Simons, Berkowitz, and Moyer (1970) suggested that experience similarity will translate into client preferences; however, this assertion has been minimally studied. Contrary to expectations about the benefits of experience similarity, Mamodhousen, Wright, Trembley, and Poitras-Wright (2005) found that women clients who

were more educated (i.e., more similar in education level to their therapist) reported lower alliance scores. The study did not emphasize or test the value of education match for intervention outcomes. The limited variability in therapist education level is the most likely reason for the nonexistent empirical study of the value of education match for outcomes.

Regarding relationship status, Campbell and Johnson (1991) found that marital status of therapists was irrelevant to client perceptions of therapists in marital therapy. The CRE literature contains messages of the potential importance of marital status and relationship similarity (e.g., Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Doherty & Anderson, 2004; Ooms & Wilson, 2004), but empirical exploration of this idea is scant. The exception lies in Higginbotham and Myler's (2010) finding that participants in stepfamily-focused CRE classes reported higher program and facilitator quality when facilitators were in a stepfamily themselves. Further examinations of the importance of shared education and couple/family status are warranted.

Current Study

This study aims to address the effect of participant-facilitator match of key demographic variables - ethnicity, sex, education, and relationship status - on individual and relationship outcomes in CRE. Both from a research perspective and a practical viewpoint, the examination of factors predicting the magnitude of change in target outcomes informs the field of relationship education. Because participants attending community classes may not have the option to choose facilitators whose demography matches their own, understanding whether demographic match between participant and facilitator impacts program outcomes will help inform program developers and facilitators of potential advantages or disadvantages for specific participants. This information may also equip facilitators with information necessary to make needed adjustments in planning facilitation teams in order to accommodate different populations.

The limited literature, however, is mixed as to the importance of demographic match and involves primarily a clinical population. The one published study of facilitator-participant demographic match among CRE participants includes only European American and Latino families and is limited to examinations of the effects of match on participant ratings of facilitator and program quality. This investigation both replicates and extends this work. It takes advantage of a large, diverse sample of African American (AA) and European American (EA) participants in community-based CRE. We replicate the previous study by examining whether participant-facilitator demographic match among an AA and EA sample is related to facilitator quality. We expand the previous study by testing whether facilitator quality is related to participant outcomes, and we investigate the degree to which demographic match is directly associated with levels of change in targeted outcomes of individual and relational functioning.

The following research questions guided our research:

- RQ1: Does participant-facilitator match of ethnicity, sex, education, and/or relationship status predict reported facilitator quality?
- RQ2: Does reported facilitator quality predict change in relationship and/or individual outcomes?
- RQ3: Does participant-facilitator match of ethnicity, sex, education, and/or relationship status predict change in participant relationship and/or individual outcomes?

Methods

Participants

The analytic sample was drawn from 3,188 adults who attended a minimum of 6 weekly 2-hour long sessions in community-based CRE programs. Participants approached local community organizations who advertised for the cost-free CRE classes they were offering in a

community setting, typically the agency's facility. These non-profit organizations offer myriad family services and programs that include the CRE programs, GED classes, parenting instruction, family therapy, employment preparation, and health services. Classes ranged in size, with average class size comprising 9 individuals. Participants completed one of four possible curricula that included the seven core relationship topics/skills identified by the National Extension Relationship Marriage and Education Network through an assessment of the research on predictors of marital quality (Adler-Baeder & Futris, in press). All curricula include informational sessions, media supports, discussion, and skills practice. Facilitators were trained by the curriculum developers and most participated in a "booster" training session the following year. A site coordinator for the project oversees the implementation of classes at each site and routinely conducts "fidelity checks." Most sites offered additional supports to promote recruitment and retention (e.g., childcare, meals).

Due to extremely small numbers ($n= 108$), participants who reported an ethnicity other than European American or African American were excluded from analyses, resulting in a final analytic sample of 3,080 participants. The majority of participants (70%) were female; 30% were male. The sample was ethnically balanced, consisting of 55% African Americans and 45% European Americans.

Twenty-two percent of participants reported not having a High School degree; 27% completed High School or received a GED; 12% completed a 2-year college or Technical degree; 21% completed some college; 12% completed a 4-year degree, and 6% completed a post-college degree such as a Master's or Ph.D. Participants reported on their relationship status: married (27%), engaged and never been married (4%), remarried (5%), engaged to be remarried

(3%), not previously married and in a couple relationship (21%), divorced or widowed and in a couple relationship (9%), and single or no current relationship (22%).

Facilitators (n=119) reported on their own sex, ethnicity, education level, and marital status. Of these, 67% were female and 33% were male. Similar to the participant demographics, the sample of facilitators was ethnically balanced with African Americans (52%) and European Americans (46%); the remaining 2% indicated another ethnicity.

Facilitators were also diverse in education; 1% reported not having a High School degree, 5% completed High School or received a GED, 2% had completed trade or technical school, 13% had some college, 28% had received a 4-year degree, 14% had some graduate education, and 38% had received a post-college degree such as a Master's or Ph.D. The majority of facilitators were in their first marriage (72%), 1% were engaged and had never been married, 12% were remarried, 3% were engaged to be remarried, 2% had never been married and were in a couple relationship, 2% had been divorced or widowed and were in a couple relationship, and 10% were single or did not have a current relationship.

Measures

Participants completed self-report questionnaires containing approximately 131 items. In addition to demographic variables, multiple items assessed various dimensions of individual and relational functioning. Facilitator-participant demographic match of sex, ethnicity, education, and relationship status were used as the exogenous, predictor variables. Dummy codes were used to indicate whether participants matched at least one facilitator for each of the demographics examined (1 = match, 0 = no match). Study outcomes were represented as three latent constructs.

Facilitator Quality.

The Facilitator Quality construct was assessed using seven items as indicators: one global item (“Overall, what was the quality of the facilitator’s work?”), to which participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 (Poor) to 5 (Excellent), and six other items. For these six items, participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree) to such statements as “The facilitator(s) was effective in stimulating participation.” All item-level indicators of this construct can be found in Table 1. Cronbach’s alpha was $\alpha = .94$. A Confirmatory Factor Analysis was conducted testing this domain’s structure. Model fit indices showed excellent model fit [$\chi^2(14) = 113.88, p < .05$; CFI = .99; TLI = .98; RMSEA = .05, $p = .629$].

Couple functioning.

The Couple Functioning construct was assessed using four measures as indicators, replicating the work of Adler-Baeder and colleagues (2010). Couple Quality was assessed using a 7-point Likert scale, from 1 (Very Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Very Strongly Agree). Participants responded to 5 items taken from the Quality of Marriage Index (QMI, Norton, 1983), such as “We have a good marriage/relationship.” Cronbach’s alpha coefficients were $\alpha = .97$ at pre-test and $\alpha = .97$ at post-test. Happiness is a global item (taken from Spanier, 1976), which assesses participants’ level of happiness, all things considered, in their couple relationship on a 10-point Likert scale, from 1 (“Extremely unhappy”) to 10 (“Extremely happy”). Positive Interaction is an eight-item scale taken from a measure of affect expression (Huston & Vangelisti, 1991). Participants respond, using a four-point Likert scale, from 1 (“Never”) to 4 (“Often throughout the day”) to such items as, “On a typical day, how often do you compliment your spouse/significant other?” Alpha coefficients were $\alpha = .88$ at pre-test and $\alpha = .89$ at post-test. The Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS: Spanier, 1976) measured adjustment using 6 items. Participants respond on a five-point Likert scale, from 1 (“Always disagree”) to 5 (“Always

agree”) to items asking the extent to which they agree or disagree on such things as “Handling finances” and “Sex relations.” Alpha coefficients were $\alpha = .85$ at pre-test and $\alpha = .88$ at post-test. Model fit statistics for a measurement model Confirmatory Factor Analysis indicated excellent model fit [$\chi^2(2) = 9.01, p < .05$; CFI=.99; TLI= .98; RMSEA= .03, $p = .858$].

Individual functioning.

The Individual Functioning construct is also a replication of previous work (Adler-Baeder et al., 2010) and is assessed using three measures as indicators. Individual Empowerment was measured using a 6-item scale constructed for the study. Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (I have not thought about this) to 5 (I do this on a regular basis) to such items as “I express myself clearly and without fear.” Cronbach’s Alpha for this scale was $\alpha = .73$ at pre-test and $\alpha = .77$ at post-test. Depression/Distress (from the Center for Epidemiological Studies; Radloff, 1977) was measured using 3 items on a 4-point Likert scale from 1 (None) to 4 (3+ times in the past week). Participants responded to such items as “I felt depressed.” Cronbach’s Alpha for this scale was $\alpha = .89$ at pre-test and $\alpha = .89$ at post-test. Conflict Management was measured using a subscale of the Interpersonal Competence Scale (from Buhrmester, Furman, Wittenberg, & Reis, 1988). It consists of 6 items, using a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (Not at all like me) to 5 (Very much like me). Participants responded to such items as “I am able to put bitter feelings aside when having a fight.” Alpha coefficients were $\alpha = .80$ at pre-test and $\alpha = .84$ at post-test. Due to the estimation of a number of parameters equal to the number of sample statistics provided, the results of the Confirmatory Factor Analysis indicated perfect model fit for this domain ($\chi^2(0) = 0$; CFI=1.00). Fit indices for the measurement model of all three endogenous constructs indicated good model fit [$\chi^2(77) = 837.53, p < .05$; CFI=.95; TLI= .93; RMSEA= .06, $p = .001$].

Results

Descriptive statistics for the indicator variables for each of the latent constructs can be found in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Because a portion of participants attended CRE classes with their partners (27%), the data were dependent; therefore, Dependence (or the presence of a partner-matched survey in the dataset) was treated as a covariate and controlled in the model testing. We constructed a stringent test of our hypotheses by fitting a single structural equation model. This allowed us to consider our research questions both individually and concurrently. We simultaneously estimated regression coefficients for paths from exogenous variables (i.e., demographic match) to each of the endogenous variables (i.e., Facilitator Quality, post-program Relationship Functioning, and post-program Individual Functioning). Additionally, the paths from Facilitator Quality to post-program Relationship Functioning and post-program Individual Functioning were examined (see Table 2 for structural model estimates). Indices of model fit for the final model revealed excellent model fit [$\chi^2(278) = 1853.70, p < .05$; CFI = .93; TLI = .92; RMSEA = .04, $p = 1.0$].

Insert Table 2 about here

RQ1: Does participant-facilitator match of ethnicity, sex, education, and/or relationship status predict reported Facilitator Quality?

Examination of demographic match effects on reports of Facilitator Quality revealed one significant path. When participant sex matched that of one of the facilitators, participants reported higher perceived Facilitator Quality ($\gamma = .36, SE = .040, p < .001$). All other paths

predicting reported Facilitator Quality were non-significant. The model predicted 4.6% of the variance in Facilitator Quality.

RQ2: Does reported Facilitator Quality predict change in relationship and/or individual outcomes?

Reported Facilitator Quality was predictive of both Couple Functioning and Individual Functioning at post-test (controlling for pre-test scores). Higher levels of reported Facilitator Quality were related to higher levels of change in participant-reported Couple Functioning ($B = .379$, $SE = .057$, $p < .001$) and higher levels of change in Individual Functioning among participants ($B = .187$, $SE = .021$, $p < .001$).

RQ3: Does participant-facilitator match of ethnicity, sex, education, and/or relationship status predict change in participant relationship and/or individual outcomes?

There was a significant effect of participant-facilitator relationship status match on change in Couple Functioning ($\gamma = .165$, $SE = .082$, $p < .05$), indicating that participants reported increased change in Couple Functioning if they matched with at least one facilitator on relationship status. There were no significant effects for participant-facilitator sex, ethnicity, or education match on Couple Functioning.

For change in Individual Functioning, there was a significant effect of participant-facilitator match in education ($\gamma = .066$, $SE = .034$, $p = .05$), in which participants whose education matched at least one facilitator reported greater change in scores on Individual Functioning. There were no significant effects for participant-facilitator sex, ethnicity, or relationship status match on Individual Functioning.

The full model predicted significant variance in post-program Couple Functioning ($R^2 = 63.3\%$) and post-program Individual Functioning ($R^2 = 68.7\%$). Removing the effect of pre-

program scores from the model allowed for the estimation of unique variance in post-program Couple Functioning and Individual Functioning accounted for by the predictor variables. Results indicated that controlling for pre-program scores and dependence (by constraining regression paths and error covariances to be zero), demographic match and ratings of Facilitator Quality uniquely accounted for a statistically significant portion of the variance in post-program Couple Functioning ($R^2 = 4.2\%$), as well as post-program Individual Functioning ($R^2 = 16.9\%$). Controlling for pre-program scores, dependence, and the effects of Facilitator Quality, demographic match ratings uniquely accounted for 1.4% of the variance in Couple Functioning and 4.6% of the variance in Individual Functioning.

Discussion

Because offerings of CRE in recent years have included more diverse populations of participants, as well as more diverse facilitators in community-based program delivery, the opportunity has emerged to examine contextual factors that may impact program effects. A match hypothesis, concepts from social learning theory, and utilization of an ecocultural lens suggest that demographic similarity between intervention facilitator and recipient may be helpful for intervention outcomes; however, mixed study results are reported in the clinical literature (e.g., Flicker et al., 2008; Fujino et al., 1994; Jemmott et al., 1992). This study contributes to the literature by replicating and building on the one previous study of community-based CRE with diverse participants that examined facilitator characteristics and participant-facilitator similarity (Higginbotham & Myler, 2010). We used data from a large, diverse sample of African American and European American CRE participants and investigated the effects of demographic match on Facilitator Quality ratings and on change in targeted outcome areas. We simultaneously examined how reports of Facilitator Quality impact levels of change reported in the individual

and couple domain, and we examined the direct effects of demographic match on changes in participants' individual and couple functioning following CRE participation. Similar to the previous study, and accounting for all other variables in the model, we found that sex similarity with at least one facilitator predicts participants' assessments of Facilitator Quality. We also found that assessments of Facilitator Quality predict the amount of change reported in couple and individual functioning. Additionally, we found that education level similarity between participant and at least one facilitator predicts the level of change in individual functioning and that relationship status similarity between participant and at least one facilitator predicts the level of change in couple functioning. Ethnicity similarity did not predict Facilitator Quality ratings or levels of change in couple and individual functioning.

Although the small amount of variance accounted for by demographic match alone certainly calls into question its practical significance and suggests that demographically *dissimilar* facilitators are successful in effecting positive change in participants, we are not ready to dismiss the finding as irrelevant for program designers and CRE educators. We emphasize that these variables are uniquely related to change in participant outcomes when controlling for the effects of facilitation skills, represented in Facilitator Quality ratings. We suggest not taking an "either/or" approach, but rather, an "and" approach. Clearly, facilitation quality/skills are critical - and similarity between participant and facilitator may be helpful in enhancing program effects. We suggest the consideration of facilitator-participant match when practically possible and the continued exploration of the processes involved in the facilitator/participant experience so that steps can be taken to maximize programmatic effects.

Facilitator Quality

Different than previous work (Higginbotham & Myler, 2010), we constructed a latent variable for Facilitator Quality. We viewed items assessing skills in facilitation as indicators of quality facilitation rather than predictors. These facilitation skills include such things as providing clear explanation of course material, answering questions well, stimulating participation, and managing the flow of the session (see items listed in Table 1). Moderate to high intercorrelations among the 7 items ($r > .47$) supported the assumption that these are indicators or components of quality facilitation and consequently, supported the analytic approach used.

In this study, perceived Facilitator Quality was significantly related to participant-facilitator sex match, where participants who had a facilitator of the same sex reported greater Facilitator Quality. Although similar to the finding among CRE participants in a previous study (Higginbotham & Myler, 2010), this finding is in contrast to one previous study that indicated participant-facilitator match on sex was not related to greater effects among African American adolescents (Jemmott et al., 1999). This difference may reflect a developmental difference or simply a difference between the two samples. The finding among CRE participants may reflect a preference effect for facilitators of the same sex similar to those explicitly measured and documented in earlier studies (Atkinson et al., 1986, 1989, 1998). This preference may translate into greater comfort with the facilitator and, therefore, more positive attributions or perceptions of the quality of the facilitators. We cautiously offer the practical suggestion that a mixed gender facilitation team may enhance the program experience for CRE participants given our replication of this finding.

Our assumption that ratings of higher Facilitator Quality predict more positive outcomes was supported and suggests the practical importance of emphasizing attainment and use of good

facilitation skills. The finding verifies that it is not curriculum content alone, but rather, the quality of the delivery that matters for program effects (Higginbotham & Myler, 2010). This is important information for practitioners and program planners since much of the training in CRE curricula focuses on the content of the program and not on facilitation skills themselves (see Jakubowski, Milne, Brunner, & Miller, 2004). Indeed, many who deliver CRE are "lay" persons without specific training in pedagogy (e.g., Doherty & Anderson, 2004). This finding, therefore, suggests the value of program developers' inclusion of guidance and ideas for facilitation methods in written materials and training.

Curriculum developers and trainers can train facilitators in broad facilitation skills and the skills needed to be sensitive to the unique needs of participants and individualize or contextualize program content. In addition, if multiple programs are offered, information about facilitators can be given so that participants may select their provider. Duncan and Goddard (2005) also make several recommendations for quality facilitation in Family Life Education. They suggest that facilitators make efforts to address problems that are more proximal and emotionally engaging for participants. Asking questions that access what participants are currently experiencing may serve to increase class engagement. Similarly, using what participants already know about a topic as a basis for acquiring new knowledge of class content is offered as a suggestion to help participants organize their experiences into usable behavior change. Other skills noted are use of demonstration (through such methods as role-plays and talking through scenarios) and helping participants apply what they have learned by giving assignments and self-assessment tools (Duncan & Goddard, 2005). These and other suggestions have been incorporated into a comprehensive model for quality facilitation of Family Life Education courses (Harris, Chartier, & Davis, 2010). Incorporating specific suggestions on

instructive strategies into curriculum content may bridge the gap between teachers or facilitators who are professionally trained to educate and those who are not in community-based CRE programs.

It is also possible that the relationship between Facilitator Quality and participant outcomes is a representation of the participant-facilitator relationship quality. It has been estimated in the clinical literature that one-third of change in therapy is due to the therapist-client relationship, or the therapeutic alliance (Hubble, Duncan, & Miller, 1999). A strong therapeutic alliance exists when the client trusts that the therapist desires and is able to help the client reach his/her goals in therapy (Pinsof & Catherall, 1986). A similar effect may exist in CRE. Like a therapist, the facilitator acts as an agent in guiding the process of change in participants' attitudes and skills. As such, change in programs may be related to a strong facilitation alliance, in which facilitator and participant have a good relationship and the facilitator is trusted to help the participant learn and improve his individual and relational functioning. Indeed, it has been suggested that the relationship between facilitator and student is integral in the acquisition of knowledge and skills (Rogers, 2002). The participant's trust in the facilitator's ability to help him/her may be operationalized in multiple ways, one of which may be perceived Facilitator Quality. This study did not measure participant-facilitator relationship quality and we can find no study of CRE that specifically assesses this variable. We encourage the consideration of the inclusion of this assessment and the development of acceptable measures.

Participant-Facilitator Match

Contrary to the match hypothesis and assumptions in social learning and ecocultural theory, we did not find that match on sex or ethnicity (i.e., group membership) predicted changes in couple and individual outcomes. However, our results are the first among studies of CRE to

provide some limited evidence that education and relationship status (i.e., experience) match may be important for enhanced change in targeted program outcomes.

In contrast to the suggestion that facilitators of CRE be married (Ooms & Wilson, 2004), but consistent with suggestions that relationship status *match* may matter (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Doherty & Anderson, 2004), we found that participants report greater change in couple functioning when their relationship statuses match that of their facilitator, adding to the findings of previous empirical work, in which similar relationship status was related to higher ratings of program quality (Higginbotham & Myler, 2010). A unique strength of the current study is that more nuanced and specific relationship status categories were used (i.e., 7 possible relationship statuses).

Ours is the first study of CRE to show unique prediction of variance in the amount of change in outcomes based on education level similarity between participants and facilitators. Participants who are less educated may enter programs feeling inadequate or inferior to those with higher education levels (Ross & Huber, 1985). They may also feel misunderstood or otherwise distant from facilitators who are not members of their specific community. Thus, for those with lower education, having a facilitator with similar education may encourage a sense of self-efficacy, which translates into higher Individual Functioning change scores. Additionally, participants who are more educated may value education more, and thus place relatively greater importance on the content presented by facilitators who are equally as educated. This may then translate into more improvement in participants' functioning.

Early scholars in the clinical literature emphasized that clinician experience is most important for client outcomes (Campbell & Johnson, 1991; Orlinsky & Howard, 1980). Participant perception of facilitator expertise may be colored by whether facilitators have “been

there” and can relate to participant experiences (i.e., their experience match). Individuals from diverse groups form ecocultural niches that create a backdrop against which experiences are measured. Professionals who are not members of these niches are often unaware of and have limited understanding of unique group characteristics (Phenice et al., 2009). This limited understanding may create distance between participants and facilitators. Facilitators with shared experiences may more easily empathize with their participants, may be viewed as more credible, and can speak to the specific challenges associated with particular experiences, often in the context of the CRE program. These processes suggested in ecocultural theory can be utilized as possible explanations for the suggestion central to the matching hypothesis that individuals attending classes aimed at improving relationship skills and attitudes will have better outcomes if their facilitators have similar relational experiences.

Additionally, participant-facilitator experience similarity may be influential in the development of a good alliance (e.g., Mamodhousen et al, 2005). Just as we assume that higher Facilitator Quality ratings may reflect a stronger facilitation alliance, it may also be that that we are tapping this alliance (i.e., an element of the process) in our measures of experience match. Clinically, the client’s perception of the therapist and the formation of the therapeutic alliance occur in the process of joining, or focused attention on developing a relationship with the client in which the client feels the therapist understands him (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). For facilitators of CRE, it may be important to engage in focused joining with participants, finding other areas where there are similarities, especially when their relationship statuses and educational levels differ from that of their participants. Finding ways to understand unique experiences and exploring other areas of shared experience may be valuable.

Overall, one cannot argue with the veracity of the point that educators cannot alter their biological make-up or histories (Higginbotham & Myler, 2010); and our conclusions from this study do not "prescribe" demographic match. In fact, finding that match does not predict a large portion of the variance in program effects indicates that most participants do not experience resistance, prejudice, or a barrier when a facilitator is demographically dissimilar and may indicate that facilitators are engaging in finding ways to connect and "match" with participants in areas not assessed in the current study. However, even limited evidence of a unique contribution of demographic match to enhanced outcomes warrants the consideration of some practical ideas for implementation. These do not have to be costly. For instance, program directors can consider and implement steps that demonstrate a value for diversity in their respective agencies. In their original recruitment of employed educators, program and agency directors may encourage individuals diverse in sex, ethnicity, educational background, and relationship status to become involved. Programs could be benefitted by tapping a representation of the diversity that exists in their communities. If currently employed educators differ demographically from a significant portion of anticipated participants, recruitment of a more diverse set of community volunteers who can serve as co-facilitators may be helpful.

It is also important to note that many curricula specifically target certain demographic groups (e.g., *Smart steps: Embrace the journey* [Adler-Baeder, 2007], which is designed to be delivered to stepfamilies; *Basic Training for Couples* [Slack & Muhammad, n.d.], which is designed to be delivered to African American couples). As such, depending on the curriculum being offered, participant groups often form that are more homogenous than random recruitment might produce. Our experience in a large, statewide CRE initiative has shown that curriculum choice, as well as class location, is related to the formation of groups that are composed of

participants predominantly homogenous in ethnicity, education, relationship status, and/or family structure. Because of this, the group make-up can be anticipated and a facilitation team planned that considers participant-facilitator match.

Limitations

While diversity existed among facilitators, as well as participants, the likelihood of matching with at least one facilitator was high and resulted in somewhat unbalanced groups. Our initial use of a continuous variable (participant match with 0, 1, or 2 facilitators) yielded few numbers who matched with both facilitators due to differences between facilitators; therefore, these categories were collapsed. This resulted in less variance in these variables. Therefore, the importance of match may have been somewhat masked and could emerge as a stronger predictor in a study sample with a greater balance of matched and unmatched participant/facilitator combinations.

In this study, participant ratings of Facilitator Quality at post-test were positively and significantly related to post-test scores of both outcome dimensions (couple and individual functioning) while controlling for all else in the model. However, these dimensions were measured simultaneously, which limits the use of causal language and conclusions. It is possible that participants who experience greater levels of change are somehow more invested or make more positive attributions about the program, and thus provide higher ratings of Facilitator Quality. These more positive perceptions of the facilitator that may result from experiencing positive changes in a program may also serve to adjust a person's preference for match and may result in an increased level of ownership for personal change. In other words, experiencing positive changes may alter preferences/biases for match with a facilitator and the view of a facilitator's ability to effect change in others. Addressing the potentially bi-directional

relationship between ratings of Facilitator Quality and participant outcomes can only be done through use of multiple, longitudinal assessments of these variables, and we invite further exploration of these processes.

As is characteristic of many of the current CRE study samples of community-based program participants (Hawkins & Fackrell, 2010), some of the participants in this sample attended classes with partners and some attended singly. Analyses could not be conducted without addressing the issue of dependence. In this study, we controlled for dependence of observations by including it as a covariate. This was adequate to test our specific research questions; however, it does not provide understanding regarding potential partner effects. Because there has been some indication that attending with a partner is related to greater change in outcomes (Adler-Baeder et al., 2010), studying, rather than controlling for joint attendance is important in future investigations.

Future Directions

Although this study suggests that consideration of participant-facilitator match may be warranted in the implementation of CRE, results also suggest the need for further examination. Our initial investigation of these questions made use of the full sample and identified initial patterns for the group of participants. An important next step would be to identify how demographic characteristics of participants moderate the model and the relationships tested. It would be valuable to know whether patterns observed differ by ethnicity, education level, relationship status, or gender. When Higginbotham and Myler (2010) analyzed men and women separately, coefficients differed, but without specific testing, conclusions on whether these reflect true differences between men and women cannot be extrapolated. Lack of identified effects of match in some areas also calls into question whether this is the case for all subgroups

of participants or whether effects were “masked” by one of the groups. Future investigations can examine whether and what type of match is important for specific demographic groups in predicting targeted changes and can provide important information for program developers.

An emphasis on developing explanations for a link between match and program outcomes is suggested for future work both in theory development and empirical study. Using ecocultural theory, we suggest that match may result in the participant's positive affect and expectations for the facilitator, the facilitator's use of cultural accommodation in program delivery, and a stronger facilitator-participant alliance. Empirical assessment of these variables is a critical next step. In particular, we encourage the study of the facilitation alliance and whether this alliance is an unmeasured intervening variable between match variables, facilitator/program quality assessments, and program outcomes. It may be that we are capturing elements of the facilitator-participant alliance in our assessments of facilitator quality and match. The systemic, interpersonal nature of Couple and Relationship Education (and, in essence, all Family Life Education) suggests that the participant-facilitator relationship is an important contextual variable (Doherty, 1995). If post-program change is as strongly related to the facilitation alliance as clinical change is related to the therapeutic alliance [i.e., approximately one-third of change (Hubble, Duncan, & Miller, 1999)], a greater emphasis on the participant-facilitator relationship would be prudent and could translate into more meaningful outcomes for participants. Future work should focus on better defining and measuring the facilitation alliance and its predictors, as well as exploring its role in program outcomes.

In addition, advancing our understanding of the origin and nature of process variables is warranted. If preferences for match exist, where do they come from (i.e., are they organic or socially constructed, as ecocultural theory suggests)? And, are these preferences benevolent or

biased in nature? In other words, when is a preference for match a prejudice against an "unlike other?" Might there be negative consequences that accompany facilitating demographic match when a participant is biased? Greater understanding in this realm has implications for program planners for either accommodating or challenging a preference for match. These questions deserve further exploration.

Conclusion

There remains a dearth of information regarding CRE program context. To date, only one other study exists that addresses the potential importance of participant-facilitator match in CRE for assessments of facilitator and program quality (Higginbotham & Myler, 2010). Building on this study, we find that facilitator quality/skills are important predictors of the amount of change in targeted outcome areas in CRE. Continued efforts to promote and enhance the skills of CRE facilitators are warranted. While "what" is taught (i.e., the content) may be important, it is when there is skill in the transfer of knowledge (the "how") that participants experience added benefit. We also find some indication that participant-facilitator demographic match predicts enhanced post-program change; therefore, program planners who are sensitive to facilitator effects (i.e., match and facilitator quality) can have increased confidence that program delivery has a positive impact on participants. We encourage future research and implementation designs to give consideration to the role of demographic match on program outcomes. Rather than focusing on the influence of either facilitator quality and skills or participant-facilitator demographic match, utilizing an "and" approach will likely lead to greater understanding and potentially, enhanced program impact. These more nuanced assessments of program effects can only be conducted with larger, diverse samples of CRE program participants and promise to offer the field more complex models of best practices that consider the context of program participation.

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Observed Indicator Variables of Outcome Measures (N=3080)

Measure	Pre-test		Post-test	
	N	Mean (SD)	N	Mean (SD)
Couple Functioning				
Global Happiness	1291	6.63 (2.39)	959	7.19 (2.36)
Couple Quality	2465	4.71 (1.61)	1883	5.07 (1.55)
Positive Interaction	2438	2.80 (.71)	1870	2.87 (.72)
Adjustment	1364	3.35 (.83)	1025	3.57 (.82)
Individual Functioning				
Conflict Management	2802	3.34 (.94)	2131	3.48 (.94)
Individual Empowerment	2770	3.68 (.85)	2109	3.85 (.83)
Depression/Distress	2793	1.33 (1.04)	2132	1.11 (.97)
Facilitator Quality				
1. Explained the course material clearly and answered questions well			1962	4.59 (.77)
2. Effective in stimulating participation			1956	4.57 (.75)
3. Cared about group, offered support and encouragement			1954	4.64 (.72)
4. Managed time and flow of sessions well			1955	4.56 (.76)
5. Drew upon his/her own experiences in an appropriate and effective way			1955	4.61 (.73)
6. I liked the facilitators			1952	4.67 (.72)
7. Overall, what was the quality of the facilitator's work?			1919	4.78 (.56)

Table 2

Statistically significant regression coefficients (with standard errors in parentheses) (N=3080)

	Parameter	
	Unstandardized (SE)	Standardized
Sex Match → Facilitator Quality	.360*** (.040)	.205
Facilitator Quality → Couple Functioning	.379*** (.057)	.130
Facilitator Quality → Individual Functioning	.187*** (.021)	.251
Relationship Match → Couple Functioning	.165* (.082)	.038
Education Match → Individual Functioning	.066* (.034)	.048

Note: Dependence (or presence of a partner-matched dataset) also yielded statistically significant effects; however, these are not reported due to the function of this variable in the model as a covariate.

* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.