

Considering Culture in Marriage Education

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Understanding the culture and values of your audience is of utmost importance. Culture is defined as a person's belief system, language, behaviors and values. Understanding how a person's culture frames his or her worldview and relationships, while not passing judgment, is cultural sensitivity. Because of the strong relationship between culture and marriage, it is important that marriage and relationship education programs are culturally relevant.

In some cases, program operators or marriage educators may need to appropriately adapt their program or curriculum to connect with their audience.

It may be a good idea for your organization to use assessment tools or to develop an informal set of questions to ask at intake prior to your first class. However you decide to assess the levels of acculturation, do not assume that because a person has been in the United States for a long period that they will have become more adapted to the U.S. culture.

Acculturation

Acculturation is the process by which members of a cultural group adopt the beliefs and behaviors of another group. This is an especially important

concept for populations who are recent immigrants. It is relevant to the types of examples and role-play activities used in relationship education. Rates of acculturation can be a source of conflict within the entire family unit, causing marital dissatisfaction. For married couples who were born in another country, clashes can arise between the beliefs and values from their country of origin and those of their second-generation children, as children tend to acculturate rapidly. Refugees also experience intense levels of marital stress as they assimilate. Marriage educators can use the challenges that arise from these generational differences to demonstrate how to use relationship skills.

The concept of cultural competence (the ability to relate to a culture different than one's own) has recently become a trend in social sciences service delivery. Thus, researchers are developing tools such as questionnaires that can assess degrees of assimilation. It may be a good idea for your organization to use these or to develop an informal



set of questions to ask at intake prior to your first class. However you decide to assess the levels of acculturation, do not assume that because a person has been in the United States for a long period that they will have become more adapted to the U.S. culture.

The Role of the Extended Family

In many cultures, the extended family is deeply intertwined with the couple's nuclear family emotionally (i.e. participates in the decision-making process) and physically (i.e. often will live with the couple or nearby). Keep this in mind when using examples in your program. For example, discussing problematic in-laws may not apply to many cultures. Many Asian, Native American and Latino cultures reserve a high degree of respect for their elders, and it is often common for in-laws to live with a married couple. Thus, many of the issues regarding the "monster-in-law" that may arise in mainstream U.S. culture are a nonexistent concept to those of another culture. In fact, for those couples whose parents still live in their native country, there may be tremendous guilt that they are not more involved in caring for them.

Primary Language

Another important consideration is the primary language spoken by your target audience. If the preferred language is something other than English, then identifying the appropriate curriculum to meet the cultural needs of your target audience may require a specialized curriculum. Sometimes translations

of existing curricula can overlook the cultural needs of the intended audience. For example, there is a vast difference in the Spanish spoken by a Puerto Rican versus someone from Mexico. These cultural nuances can be very difficult to capture in the translation process alone. The selected curriculum may require further adaptation and tweaking by the facilitator or someone from the community in order to make it culturally appropriate.

In the United States, the average age for a first marriage is 25 for females and 27 for males. Further, most couples in the U.S. "marry for love," and divorce is culturally acceptable. These cultural norms related to marriage are not likely to be common in other non-Western countries. Some cultures have arranged marriages, believe marriage is the joining of two families (versus two individuals), or expect marriage to occur at a very young age.

Marriage in Other Cultures

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Learning Style

Because of the major differences within education systems across the globe, a marriage educator must take into consideration different learning styles. For

example, one group may be familiar with a lecture format and may not be comfortable participating in group activities. Another group may not have received much formal education and may not be comfortable following a formal presentation. It is important to get a feel for the individuals in your audience prior to the first class. This also pertains to refugees, who may be weary of receiving help from strangers and who may have very different communication styles than those in mainstream U.S. culture. For example, the meaning of eye contact, the role of women, and personal space vary greatly from culture to culture.

Gender Norms

More traditional gender roles tend to exist in many Eastern and Latin cultures. This is important to consider when using examples and structuring activities. Refugees' gender roles may be challenged upon arrival into the United States. For instance, "sharing" household duties and/or "dual-earner households" may not be relevant to some couples. In this case, curricula offering more traditional examples of couple conflict and couple satisfaction should be used.

Be Aware of your Own Cultural Biases

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The Messenger

Whenever possible, a facilitator should mirror the audience's cultural heritage or have a shared experience working with this population. Equally important is the ability to develop rapport with both the men and women attending the workshop so that each feels comfortable in his/her presence. Great care must be taken not to present yourself as someone who has all the answers but instead to facilitate an atmosphere in which the wisdom of the collective body can be tapped, embraced and openly shared.

Culture influences relationships. Practitioners must consider this when adapting marriage and relationship education programs to effectively reach their target audience.

The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center (NHMRC) would like to thank Dr. Errol Bolden and Dr. Rolando Diaz-Loving for their contributions to this tip sheet. We would also like to acknowledge Ervin Lucero, Courtney Harrison, MPA, and Rachel Derrington, MSW, of the Resource Center for their contributions.

This is a product of the NHMRC, led by co-directors Mary Myrick, APR, and Jeanette Hercik, Ph.D., and project manager, Patrick Patterson, MSW, MPH.