Successes and Challenges of Family and Consumer Science Extension Agents in the Implementation of Couple and Relationship Education

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SUCCESES AND CHALLENGES OF FAMILY AND CONSUMER SCIENCE EXTENSION AGENTS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF COUPLE AND RELATIONSHIP EDUCATION

by

Stacey A. Huffaker

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

Family, Consumer, and Human Development

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UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
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2011
ABSTRACT

Successes and Challenges of Family and Consumer Science Extension Agents in the Implementation of Couple and Relationship Education

by

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Utah State University, 2011

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Although healthy relationship initiatives are becoming more common, relatively little is known about the processes and outcomes of these initiatives. This study uses a phenomenological qualitative approach to examine the experiences of Family and Consumer Science (FCS) extension agents in the implementation of couple and relationship education in the Utah Healthy Relationship Initiative. Data were collected through quarterly report forms submitted by extension agents describing successes and barriers to their work. Successes in the project related to collaborative partnerships, attendance/participation, and positive outcomes for participants. Collaborative partnerships were instrumental in reaching more participants and finding cultural resources. The challenges that agents reported included constraints for participants and agents’ difficulties with resources. The findings underscore the benefits of creating flexible, low-intensity, and low-cost activities that attract participants and reduce some of
the barriers to participation, as well as teaming up with community organizations to implement couple and relationship education programs.
I would like to thank Kay Bradford, Linda Skogrand, and Brian Higginbotham for their commitment, help, and encouragement in the process of completing my thesis. Kay certainly went above and beyond to answer questions and assist with the writing process. Linda was a wonderful teacher of the qualitative process, and Brian was there to offer “tough love” as well as support. It was truly an honor and privilege to work with such a supportive committee who went beyond the call of duty of professors to be colleagues and friends.

I would also like to thank those who made this project possible, and anyone else who helped me along the way. I would also like to give special thanks to all of the extension agents for their hard work and effort in this project! I thoroughly enjoyed getting to meet and interview many of them and find out about the great things they are doing in their counties.

Thank you to my wonderful family who has been very supportive of my thesis, my education, and all other endeavors of my life. Les quiero muchisimo! I love you all! I would like to thank all of my professors whom I have had at Utah State University. It has been such a wonderful opportunity for growth, learning, and discovery. Thank you to all friends and graduate students who gave any kind of moral support throughout graduate school. I could not have done it without you! I also want to thank Carma Sutherland, who many years ago believed in me and inspired me to go to graduate school.

Stacey Huffaker
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The conditions of couple relationships, whether healthy or unhealthy, have impact upon child, adult, and community well-being (Adler-Baeder, Shirer, & Bradford, 2007; Bradford & Barber, 2005; Cummings, Goeke-Morey, Papp, & Dukewich, 2002; Uebelacker, Courtnage, & Whisman, 2003). While relationship distress has been linked to negative outcomes for children and adults (Bradford & Barber, 2005; Cummings et al., 2002; Uebelacker et al., 2003), healthy relationships are linked to positive outcomes for children, adults, and the communities in which they live (Adler-Baeder et al., 2007; Bradford & Barber, 2005).

Support for healthy relationships has traditionally been offered in the form of therapy for distressed couples, counsel given by religious leaders, or workshops given by family life educators. However, many who are experiencing relationship distress do not seek professional help because they may feel that it is intrusive or there may be a fear of stigma of treatment or difficulties due to high costs. Couple and relationship education (CRE) may be a viable way to reach out to a broader population because it is relatively less stigmatizing, intrusive, and expensive (Larson, 2004). Although it may not be sufficient for the needs of some couples with more serious problems, it is believed to serve as a preventative means against later problem development (Larson, 2004). Several terms have been used such as marriage enrichment or marriage education (Doherty & Anderson, 2004), but the term CRE is used here in an effort to be inclusive of all
significant couple relationships and to more accurately reflect the scope of the current project.

In recent years there has been a surge of interest in CRE offered in various settings by numerous providers (Doherty & Anderson, 2004; Larson, 2004). Government organizations such as the U.S. Administration for Children and Families have been increasingly concerned about risks that come from unhealthy relationships. Formal and informal healthy relationship initiatives that teach CRE have grown out of this concern (Brotherson & Duncan, 2004).

CRE can include many facets, but generally has the goal of teaching research-based skills, attitudes, and behaviors that will help people to improve their relationships (Hawkins, Carroll, Doherty, & Willoughby, 2004). It can be offered as prevention before couples become distressed or offered as remediation for existing problems (Halford, 2004; Larson, 2004). Evaluated CRE programs typically consist of some of the following components: awareness, which focuses on clarifying expectations and relationship processes; feedback, or individualized assessment and feedback about a relationship; cognitive change, which encourages couples to change attitudes and thoughts; and skills training which involves different formats in which couples can practice important relationship skills (Halford, 2004).

CRE has been shown to be effective in improving relationship skills and communication (Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2008; Jakubowski, Milne, Brunner, & Miller, 2004). Despite the documented efficacy of such programs, however, these interventions may not reach those who potentially need them most (Larson, 2004). For example, research suggests that distressed couples may not seek therapy, or seek it
too late (Doss, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009), and that many avoid intervention due to the time, cost, and even inattention to problems (Doss, Atkins, & Christensen, 2003). This study represents a small step toward addressing important issues such as planning, recruitment, and retention. This study focuses on the successes and challenges unique to Family and Consumer Science (FCS) cooperative extension agents in their planning and implementation of CRE.

**Theoretical Framework**

The major theories used to guide this study include Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory and life course theory (White & Klein, 2008). The comprehensive framework proposed by Hawkins and colleagues (Hawkins et al., 2004) is also used to provide a model for the multiple ways in which family life education can be implemented. Phenomenological theory (Creswell, 2007) was used to guide the research.

**Ecological theory.** The ecological perspective focuses on the complexities of different environments that affect individuals and their families (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Ecological theory notes differences between ethnicity/race, culture, socioeconomic status, gender, and setting, and focuses on different systems that interact in an individual’s environment. Microsystems are the most proximal, and involve an individual’s direct interactions with significant others such as families, peer groups, and local systems such as schools and churches. The mesosystem includes interactions between these different Microsystems. The exosystem is not directly connected to the individual but indirectly affects the other systems. The macrosystem includes the general cultural context or social norms that affect society as a whole and, thus, have impact on individuals, and the chronosystem accounts for interactions and events within all systems over time.
Ecological theory suggests that problems such as familial instability are often caused by problems within an individual’s exosystem (Skogrand & Shirer, 2007).

In family life education, the ecological perspective recognizes the diversity of contexts and influences on individuals within those contexts (Skogrand & Shirer, 2007). This theory informs family life educators about ways that they must meet diverse needs in the recruitment of participants, build relationships of trust, use partnerships, employ various modes of teaching, consider various levels of intensity of education (Hawkins et al., 2004), and use incentives (Skogrand & Shirer, 2007).

**Life course theory.** Although many marriage educators teach general principles that are generalizable across marriages, life course theory “emphasizes the importance of time, context, process, and meaning on human development and family life” (Bengston & Allen, 1993, p. 471). Individuals’ need for and interest in CRE is assumed to vary based on life stages and circumstances (Halford, 2004; Hawkins et al., 2004). For example, adolescents and young adults may be very interested in premarital education but less likely to attend marriage education classes because of a lack of urgency (Silliman & Schumm, 2004). Engaged couples may need fewer conflict resolving skills and more education about risk and protective factors, which can be identified by premarital inventories (Hawkins et al., 2004). An appropriate topic for the early years of marriage could be conflict resolution that prevents small problems from growing into bigger issues over time. CRE from a life course perspective also focuses on transition times or events in which people are ready to be taught, such as the transition to parenthood, which is
considered to be one of the most critical times for a couple (Hawkins, Gilliland, Christiaens, & Carroll, 2002).

Life course theory explains that the transition to parenthood might be particularly stressful for families with low incomes because they may be constantly struggling to meet their basic needs, and they may feel more time-restricted than middle class families to attend CRE activities (Hawkins et al., 2004). Implications for marriage education at this time of life include the need for low-cost, low-intensity curriculum delivered by organizations in which parents are already involved. Researchers also suggest the need to consider life course changes such as cohabitation, divorce, and remarriage that could affect the needs of the families that receive CRE (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Goddard & Olsen, 2004; Halford, 2004; Hawkins et al., 2004).

To provide further context of the study and agents’ varied methods of implementation, a comprehensive framework for CRE will now be discussed (Hawkins et al., 2004). This model implicitly draws upon ecological systems theory and explicitly draws upon life course theory.

**A comprehensive framework for couple and relationship education.** Hawkins et al. (2004) proposed a comprehensive framework for CRE that posits seven components to CRE: timing, target, method, intensity, content, setting, and delivery. The first component, *timing*, refers to when in the lifespan CRE is taught. Certain stages and changes in people’s lives may create an ideal time to teach certain principles to best meet their needs (Hawkins et al., 2004). Next, *target* relates to who is being taught. While much CRE is taught to white middle-class people, the comprehensive framework acknowledges diversity in various audiences and their differing needs (Hawkins et al.,
2004). The component of intensity indicates how much is taught and how in depth it is. Interventions can range from low intensity activities such as media campaigns to workshops or activities that are high intensity in time, psychological sensitivity, and content (Hawkins et al., 2004). Another component, content, refers to what is taught in terms of relational skills, awareness/knowledge/attitudes, and motivations/virtues.

Most germane to this project were the components of setting, method, and delivery. Hawkins et al. (2004) encouraged relationship educators to pay particular attention to the component of setting, or the location in which CRE is taught. Professionals can effectively offer CRE across multiple settings by partnering with existing public services such as government, educational, or religious organizations. Method relates to how CRE is taught. It emphasizes the importance of competent instructors who address their participants’ particular learning styles. CRE can target various learning styles by using different teaching methods, ranging from traditional forms of education such as lecture and video to more experiential education such as role-playing. Delivery refers to how CRE is disseminated to the public. Traditionally, CRE has been delivered by specialists, but other modes of delivery related to this project include integrated education (professionals who provide CRE in addition to their regular services) and cultural seeding (changing social norms through media communications and public awareness campaigns). While marriage specialists may not always directly teach, they still play a vital role in the dissemination of CRE. They may provide information, training and materials, build collaborations, and provide research-validated information to the public (Hawkins et al., 2004).
In the case of the Utah Healthy Relationship Initiative, FCS agents were extended the opportunity to implement CRE projects in their respective counties. They were encouraged to team with community organizations such as schools, religious leaders, health care settings, therapists, and government agencies. In some counties, coalitions were formed or utilized to bring community organizations together to plan these activities. In some cases, FCS agents were the direct instructors, but in many cases they collaborated with community partners to arrange for facilities and speakers. Activities ranged from traditional learning such as lectures to experiential activities such as date nights that included rock climbing and games. The programs for Latinos were often family themed because Latinos tend to place relatively higher importance on families than on the couple relationship (Skogrand & Shirer, 2007). FCS agents also directed the dissemination of CRE in the form of newsletters, radio shows, and supplementary materials such as the Utah Marriage Handbook (Adler-Baeder, Higginbotham, Schramm, & Paulk, 2007), given to county residents who obtained marriage licenses.

**Purpose of the Study**

Relatively little is known about the processes of implementing CRE initiatives (Doherty & Anderson, 2004). Even less is known about Family and Consumer Science (FCS) extension agents as coordinators of CRE. More research is needed regarding these and other coordinators of CRE. This question has implications for other issues such as recruitment and retention and program implementation, including information about communities’ ability to build coalitions, and the methods by which CRE is spread across different organizations (Doherty & Anderson, 2004).
The purpose of this study is to examine the FCS agents’ successes and challenges in the implementation of CRE initiatives. The study used a qualitative phenomenological research approach to explore the experiences of FCS extension agents in Utah and drew out significant themes to understand the “essence” of agents’ experiences in the implementation of the Utah Healthy Relationship Initiative (Creswell, 2007).

Because extension agents typically are strategically located in their own counties, know the needs of their county, are charged with the responsibility to reach diverse audiences, and are responsible for extending researched-based information to the public, they may be uniquely prepared to coordinate CRE. This study examined the experiences of extension agents in the implementation of CRE in terms of successes and challenges. Findings from this study may inform extension professionals and other educators in the implementation of CRE across many settings and with many collaborative partners. It may also serve as an example of how other states and counties could implement CRE initiatives.
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Overview

This chapter reviews research findings regarding the impact of relationship dysfunction and health for adults and children, and the history and efficacy of couple and relationship education. Healthy marriage initiatives are discussed along with examples of initiatives that have been implemented in the United States, followed by a description of the current project. An introduction to Cooperative Extension is given as it applies to CRE, followed by research-based information about successes and barriers to the implementation of CRE. The conclusion of this chapter is a presentation of the research questions of this study.

The Need for Couple and Relationship Education

Relationship distress has long been linked to negative outcomes for children and adults (Bradford & Barber, 2005; Cummings et al., 2002; Uebelacker et al., 2003). Negative outcomes have been found especially for children of parents with destructive types of marital conflict and communication styles (Bradford & Barber, 2005; Cummings et al., 2002). Parents who have destructive conflict patterns may be relatively less responsive to their children’s emotional needs and have negative parenting behaviors such as low levels of affection and supervision, negative communication patterns, and increased restrictiveness (Bradford & Barber, 2005; Troxel & Matthews, 2004). These negative parenting behaviors are linked to youth internalizing and externalizing behaviors
(Bradford & Barber, 2005), poor coping skills (Cummings et al., 2002), and other negative consequences. Children subjected to intense marital conflict and marital dissolution may be at risk for unintentional injuries and behavioral problems such as delinquency, alcohol and drug abuse, and sexual promiscuity (Troxel & Matthews, 2004). They are more vulnerable to stress; emotional, psychological, and physical problems; lower socio-economic status; and chronic disease than children of parents with relatively lower conflict levels and intact relationships (Troxel & Matthews, 2004).

Unhealthy communication styles are correlated with marital dissatisfaction and depression for both men and women (Uebelacker et al., 2003) and unrealistic expectations and destructive communication patterns are predictors of divorce (Clements, Stanley, & Markman, 2004; Driver, Tabares, Shapiro, Nahm, & Gottman, 2003; Neff & Karney, 2005; Orbuch, Veroff, Hassan, & Horrocks, 2002). While some divorces may result in more positive outcomes than staying in destructive relationships (Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007), Amato (2000) found that divorced adults and their children scored lower than others on several indicators of well-being. Divorce also has negative effects on parent-child relations. These effects may include a loss of emotional support, economic hardship, and an increase in the negative events in their lives that are risk factors for lower levels of well-being (Amato, 2000). Adults who are in conflicted relationships and who divorce are prone to relatively more emotional, psychological, and chronic physical health problems, and poverty (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Divorced and single-parent families are more likely to be in poverty than two-parent families, and are more likely to need government assistance (Thomas & Sawhill, 2005).
Recently, Amato and Cheadle (2005) used data from a 20-year longitudinal study to determine the impact of divorce of the grandparent generation on their grandchildren. They found that the grandchildren whose grandparents had divorced had lower education, had greater marital distress, and had lower quality relationships with their mothers and fathers than those whose grandparents had not divorced. To explain these linkages across generations, the researchers found that the middle generation (the parents) obtained relatively low education, had lower stability in their own marriages, and had more conflict between themselves and their children. Thus, evidence suggests that relational instability has intergenerational impact (Amato & Cheadle, 2005).

Some of the many reasons that couples divorce may include lack of satisfaction, infidelity, unrealistic expectations, falling out of love, and lack of commitment (Hawkins et al., 2009). While some children and adults benefit from divorce when there has been a highly conflictual relationship, there is evidence that most people who divorce have a somewhat low-conflict marriage and their children experience a decrease in well-being after a divorce (Halford, Markman, & Stanley, 2008).

Not surprisingly, positive couple processes and quality relationships are linked with positive aspects of child and adult well-being (Cummings et al., 2002; Proulx, Helms, & Buehler, 2007). Additionally, healthy, stable relationships are linked with community well-being (Adler-Baeder, Shirer, et al., 2007). Characteristics of a healthy couple relationship include commitment to couple and child relationships, positive communication, positive conflict resolution, intimacy and emotional support, fidelity and loyalty (Moore et al., 2004; Young, 2004), marital satisfaction, lack of domestic violence, interaction and time together, and duration of the relationship (Moore et al., 2004). Other
important characteristics of healthy couples are respect for one’s spouse, forgiveness, positive affect, and being able to talk positively about one’s past relationship experiences (Young, 2004). DeFrain and Asay (2007) found that healthy families around the world have similar characteristics, such as appreciation and affection, commitment, positive communication, enjoyable time together, spiritual well-being, and resiliency to stress and crisis. These scholars indicated that healthy families usually include healthy couple relationships (Defrain & Asay, 2007).

**Couple and Relationship Education**

Given the outcomes of unhealthy versus healthy relationships, different forms of relationship support have been developed. Marital therapy emerged and was practiced during much of the 20th century, but structured CRE other than therapy was fairly uncommon prior to the last three decades. However, informal counsel and education has long been offered by religious leaders.

Beginning in the middle 1990s there was a growing surge of interest in the new term of “marriage education” (Doherty & Anderson, 2004). Many academic, private, public, and religious groups began focusing on preserving marriage; scholars began to focus on premarital education; and policymakers began to form policies that encouraged CRE. Some church groups began to support marriage education programs and require premarital education before weddings were performed in their congregations (Brotherson & Duncan, 2004; Doherty & Anderson, 2004). By the end of the 1990s about one-quarter to one-third of couples getting married in the United States, Australia, and Britain were participating in some kind of CRE (Halford, 2004).
In the early 2000s there was increased interest in CRE from the U.S. government and other groups. This interest grew out of the concern that well-being, for both children and adults, is affected by the health of relationships. However, there was growing recognition that CRE had traditionally been offered to white middle-class people in costly, time-consuming workshops that were based on traditional teaching methods. Researchers began to call for “more flexible and innovative programs” (Larson, 2004, p. 423) and alternate approaches to CRE (Hawkins et al., 2004). With the formation of healthy marriage initiatives, scholars, policymakers, and educators began to see the need to use innovative ways to reach out to broader, more diverse audiences, including those in poverty, and those who were cohabitating or not in traditional married relationships (Ooms, 2007). Currently, CRE is provided in a variety of formats, including inventories of couples’ strengths or skills training by family specialists or family therapists (Halford, 2004; Larson, 2004). Religious organizations continue to offer premarital education to marrying couples, often in the form of curricula that combine religious and empirically-derived material (Halford, 2004). Most recently, however, CRE has been offered through various community agencies in connection with healthy marriage initiatives throughout the United States and in several different countries (Markman & Halford, 2005). Although it has been a slow process, these initiatives are making efforts to reach out more to diverse groups such as cohabitating or nontraditional couples and poor and culturally diverse populations (e.g., Higginbotham & Skogrand, 2010). Some of these changes are occurring in terms of recruitment, adaptation of curriculum, and offering more flexible programming (Ooms, 2007).
**Effectiveness of couple and relationship education.** Generally, marital and family interventions have been shown to be effective in enriching marital and family relations and in helping distressed couples (Shadish & Baldwin, 2003). More specifically, CRE has been shown to be effective in reducing relationship distress and enhancing communication skills and relationship quality (Fawcett, Hawkins, Blanchard, & Carroll, 2010; Hawkins et al., 2008; Jakubowski et al., 2004). In a meta-analysis of 117 studies of couple and relationship education, Hawkins and colleagues (2008) found significant effect sizes ranging from $d = .24$ to $.36$ for relationship quality, and from $d = .36$ to $.54$ for communication skills. According to Cohen (1988), an effect size of $.20$ is small, $.50$ is medium, and $.80$ is large, although the strength of the effect size may differ by field (Cohen, 1988). Studies of programs in the social sciences such as adolescent pregnancy prevention programs (found to have a general effect size of $d = .33$) or drug abuse prevention programs (found to have a general effect size of $d = .30$) have similar effect sizes to those reported from the meta-analysis (Hawkins & Fackrell, 2010). Because relationship education focuses largely on prevention rather than remediation, the magnitude of change may be less than in couples who need to make immediate changes (Carroll & Doherty, 2003).

While there are many relationship education programs, relatively few are empirically supported by rigorous evaluation guidelines. Jakubowski et al. (2004) reviewed a number of programs for their efficacy and reported three efficacious programs, including Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP), Relationship Enhancement (RE), and the Couples Communication Program (CC). The criteria for being labeled “efficacious” was having two or more published studies by
different research teams with control or comparison groups as well as random assignment. Those programs labeled “possibly efficacious” only had one published study with random assignment and multiple studies by the same researchers (Jakubowski et al., 2004). Even so, researchers have noted the difficulty of conducting randomized and control studies in the social sciences (Birch, Weed, & Olsen, 2004; Doherty & Anderson, 2004). Some have suggested that if evaluated curricula or programs cannot be found, the curriculum should be drawn from research-based information (Adler-Baeder, Higginbotham, & Lamke, 2004).

Jakubowski et al. (2004) also reviewed several programs that had mixed results and, thus, were described as “possibly efficacious.” While there were some positive outcomes, there were also programs with negative outcomes or non-significant outcomes. These were Couple Commitment and Relationship Enhancement (Couples CARE), Association for Couples in Marriage Enrichment (ACME), and Couple Coping Enhancement Training (CCET). However, many programs have not yet been empirically tested. Jakubowski et al. (2004) listed several, including Structured Enrichment (SE), Marriage Encounter (ME), The Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills (PAIRS), Imago Relationship Therapy (IRT), Traits of a Happy Couple (THC), and Saving your Marriage Before It Starts (SYMBIS). Jakubowski et al. (2004) stated that Gottman’s Marriage Survival Kit, while based on research, has no published research about its effectiveness.

Similarly, Caroll and Doherty (2003) did a meta-analysis that included 13 different premarital programs with experimental groups. Ten of the programs used a family development theory as their guiding framework. Others used behavioral or social
learning theories. Overall, premarital programs were effective in immediate increases in communication, conflict management, and relationship quality. However, because many studies in the meta-analysis did not include follow-ups, it is hard to know if the premarital education is effective longer than 6 months to 3 years (Caroll & Doherty, 2003). Even so, seven studies in the meta-analysis did include follow-up research and some long-term positive effects were found (Carroll & Doherty, 2003). For example, a longitudinal study of PREP found that at a 5-year follow-up, communication skills had increased in the couples who had received the intervention. A German version of PREP yielded positive results in a 3-year study, and a study of a Self-Prep program which incorporates self-regulation training into PREP found that after 4 years, high risk couples had less erosion of relationship satisfaction than the control group (Carroll & Doherty, 2003). A 4-year follow-up study of Couple CARE found that couples who had participated in the Couple CARE program were more satisfied in their relationship than those who had not.

In their meta-analysis of relationship education programs, Blanchard, Hawkins, Baldwin, and Fawcett (2009) reported that four experimental studies had effect sizes of $d = .57$ for those couples who had reported relationship distress before the intervention. They also found modest effect sizes in communication skills for couples in the programs that had longer-term follow-up studies of seven months or more. Five of these were experimental studies with an effect size of $d = .59$ (Blanchard et al., 2009).

There are some limitations to the research about the effectiveness of couple and relationship education. Because until recently much research has investigated European-American and middle-class couples who are in their first marriage (Carroll & Doherty,
2003; NHMRC, 2009; Ooms, 2007), it cannot be determined whether these interventions are effective for all couples. There is not one standardized outcome measure for effectiveness, and there have been no studies that compare effectiveness of CRE programs directly against each other (Carroll & Doherty, 2003). However, they have been found to be effective overall.

While much is known about CRE and its effectiveness in its traditional forms, less is known about the effectiveness of community marriage initiatives (Doherty & Anderson, 2004; NHMRC, 2009), which have been “proliferating across the country” (Doherty & Anderson, 2004, p. 429). Most program evaluations have focused on impact or outcome evaluations (Doherty & Anderson, 2004) and most community-level interventions have not been tested rigorously (Birch et al., 2004). More research is needed about the successes and challenges in the process of program implementation (Doherty & Anderson, 2004). Process evaluations that study how the programs are delivered will be key ingredients in evaluations of these projects (Doherty & Anderson, 2004). This study represents a small step toward better understanding these processes.

**Healthy Relationship Initiatives**

Healthy relationship initiatives are a response to the need to help individuals prepare for healthy relationships, and strengthen existing couple relationships. They may even provide a degree of remediation for those experiencing problems. The evaluation of such initiatives is germane due to the impact of relational health on individual and couple well-being. However, this fairly new delivery method, which relies heavily on collaboration with community organizations, is still in the early stages of exploration. More research is needed about the process and outcomes of these projects. This study
examines the experiences of providers of CRE for a healthy relationship initiative. The following paragraphs discuss what is known about CRE initiatives.

Because healthy relationships have been shown to increase child and adult well-being, government agencies have implemented policies to strengthen relationships and marriages (ACF, 2009; Brotherson & Duncan, 2004). The current state-funded initiative may be seen in part as a result of that impetus. In 2002 the Administration for Children and Families’ (ACF) Healthy Marriage Initiative was signed by President George W. Bush “to encourage marriage and promote the well-being of children...” and “to help couples develop the skills and knowledge to form and sustain healthy marriages” (ACF, 2009). The Healthy Marriage Initiative emphasized community-based marriage strengthening demonstrations, federally offered marriage education and strengthening programs to low-income couples that already receive government services such as TANF funding, and research about marriage strengthening programs (ACF, 2009).

In 2005 the TANF program was renewed through The Deficit Reduction Act until September 2010 (ACF, 2009). The three objectives of TANF that are related to marriage are: “reducing the dependency of needy parents by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage, preventing out-of-wed-lock pregnancies, and encouraging the formation and maintenance of two-parent families” (ACF, 2009). Under the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005, 150 million dollars were allocated annually to support marriage strengthening programs and fatherhood programs.

Some of the allowable activities under TANF that are related to the current project include public advertising campaigns about the value of healthy marriages and skills for stable marriages; high school education about marriage, relationships, and
finances; marriage education and related skills training such as parenting, relationship skills, conflict management, and budgeting for married and unmarried couples; pre-marital education for engaged couples or others interested in marriage; and conducting research about the benefits of healthy marriage education (ACF, 2009). States are given the choice about how to use these funds in order to carry out these marriage strengthening initiatives.

**Arguments for and against healthy relationship initiatives.** Despite the current prevalence of healthy marriage initiatives, there are still many questions about how they should be implemented, and there is an ongoing debate about whether the government should intervene to strengthen marriage relationships (Hawkins et al., 2009; Hughes, 2004; Ooms & Wilson, 2004). Such unions are viewed by some as private entities too personal for government interference (Hawkins et al., 2009; Ooms & Wilson, 2004). However, Hawkins et al. (2009) argued that while care should be taken about government involvement in personal matters, these are not necessarily private choices because the well-being of marriage relationships affects the well-being of children, which in turn affects the community. Another important point is that the public costs of relationship dissolution are substantial. Proponents of marriage initiatives tend to be advocates of using preventative measures to avoid problems that come from failed marriages and unwed births that ultimately entail government support.

Others who are concerned about the well-being of children argue that programs focused on marital education may be a misappropriation of government funding and tax dollars which could be better spent on improving employment opportunities, child care, housing, and health care for the poor (Hawkins et al., 2009; Ooms & Wilson, 2004).
Conversely, those in favor of such projects contest that the amount of money used for relationship strengthening initiatives is miniscule in comparison with the amount of money put toward welfare and economic projects, and that these funds would not make that much more difference if put towards traditional TANF uses (Hawkins et al., 2009). Supporters of relationship education argue that the health of relationships and families affects the economy reciprocally rather than just the economy affecting families (Hawkins et al., 2009), asserting that in strengthening couple relationships, other problems such as childhood poverty could be reduced (Ooms & Wilson, 2004). Furthermore, recent state surveys have shown that low-income people often value marriage and would be interested in participating in relationship education classes. Offering low-cost classes to all people may provide more access to those who would not otherwise be able to afford to attend relationship education classes (Ooms & Wilson, 2004).

Some groups argue that healthy marriage initiatives promote traditional marriages while looking down on other family forms, or that they encourage women to remain in abusive relationships (Hughes, 2004). However, the stated goals of healthy relationship initiatives generally have been to help those who choose marriage to strengthen their marriage, but also to focus on helping people in all situations have healthy relationships. This varies from increasing commitment in a non-committal relationship to safely leaving a dangerous abusive relationship (Halford et al., 2008).

**Evaluation of healthy relationship initiatives.** With what has been described as a “marriage movement” (Brotherson & Duncan, 2004), there are many relationship education initiatives throughout the United States. There is still a great need for
evaluation of these initiatives, yet there are many challenging issues involved in the evaluation process. Most initiatives are usually implemented without control groups, and random assignment is difficult (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2010). Tracking of programs is often done by volunteers and many participants do not respond to evaluation forms. Because of gaps of information and inconsistent reporting, much data is not representative of general populations (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2010). The following paragraphs will describe some of the healthy marriage initiatives and what is known or unknown about their effectiveness.

Evaluations of healthy relationship initiatives are only in the beginning processes (Hawkins & Fackrell, 2010). Hawkins and Fackrell (2010) conducted a meta-analysis of studies of healthy relationship initiatives targeting low-income couples. Their analyses of 15 couple education programs found small-to-moderate effect sizes for improvements in relationship quality, commitment, stability, and communication skills: $d = .25$ for studies with control groups, and $d = .29$ for studies that used one-group pre-post designs. These effect sizes are only slightly smaller than outcomes for middle-class couples (Hawkins & Fackrell, 2010). In addition, three major rigorous evaluation projects are being conducted by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) for the Administration of Children and Families (ACF; Hawkins & Fackrell, 2010). The programs are the Building Strong Families (BSF) project, Supporting Healthy Marriages (SHM), and Community Healthy Marriage Initiatives (CHMI).

BSF is an evaluation of eight programs designed to strengthen relations of unwed couples (Wood, McConnell, Moore, Clarkwest, & Hsueh, 2010). In the preliminary results, the research team found that the programs did not have the expected positive
effects for all locations: only programs in Oklahoma had positive outcomes. Important differences in Oklahoma’s program included a different curriculum (*Becoming Parents*), the program’s relatively shorter time period, and participants’ higher likelihood of completing the program. Because the study is only in its early stages, later results may show more differences between outcomes for experimental and control groups (Wood et al., 2010).

SMH (Dion, 2005) is a project for low-income married couples who have at least one child under the age of 18 years or who are expecting a child. The years for the study are 2003-2013. The goal of this project is to strengthen marriages, help distressed marriages, and prevent unnecessary divorce. No results of this project are published yet (Knox & Fein, 2008).

CHMI (Dion, 2005) is directed towards individuals, with goals to promote the cultural norm of marriage through community support and to reduce divorce through the use of media campaigns about the value of marriage and coalitions that support marriage (Dion, 2005). The evaluation spans 2003-2011 and will assess the effectiveness of community level interventions to decrease out-of-wedlock births, increase parental responsibility in the payment of child support, and support the financial well-being of children (Dion, 2005). Preliminary results report the successes and challenges 18 months into the project, which include recruitment and retention, and collaboration with organizations. These will be discussed more in depth later in the chapter (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010).

These evaluations are only a beginning for understanding what works in healthy relationship initiatives (Myrick, Ooms, & Patterson, 2009). While relationship education
has been around for several years, healthy relationship initiatives are fairly new. It may take several years or even decades to know how to implement healthy relationship initiatives that successfully serve diverse populations (Myrick et al., 2009).

Many community initiatives began as grassroots initiatives with concerned community citizens or lay leaders (Doherty & Anderson, 2004). One of the earliest examples of such programs is Marriage Savers. Founded by Mike and Harriet McManus in 1996, it is an organization that partners with churches to strengthen marriages. Clergy members sign community marriage policies (CMPs) to offer marriage enrichment programs through the use of trained mentors assigned to engaged and young married couples. There has been a positive effect associated with CMPs across many participating communities: divorce rates in CMP counties decreased by more than 2% per year than in comparison counties (Birch et al., 2004). The authors of this study suggested studying these initiatives more rigorously to find out how to effect change in communities, by collecting data from community members and leaders, and gathering accurate data regarding program implementation (Birch et al., 2004).

Another example of a grassroots initiative is First things First (FTF), a prominent non-profit organization in Tennessee that began in 1997 out of concern because of high rates of divorce, out-of-wedlock births, and single-parent headed households. Since the inception of this project, participants reported lower levels of these issues. This project teaches classes to teens, individuals, engaged couples, and married couples (First Things First, 2010; Hawkins et al., 2004).

A few healthy relationship initiatives are partnered with community organizations, with Cooperative Extension Services (CES) playing a key role in many
facets of the projects, including program implementation and evaluation. For example, the Alabama Community Healthy Marriage Initiative (ACHMI) is a 5-year project to strengthen couple relationships in order to strengthen families (Adler-Baeder, Anders, et al., 2008; Adler-Baeder, Lucier, et al., 2008). It is funded by the ACF and is a partnership between Auburn University’s Department of Human Development and Family Studies and other community organizations. Preliminary findings from pre-post tests during year two of the evaluation found that adult participants improved significantly on nearly every measure that was on the survey (Adler-Baeder, Anders, et al., 2008). Youth participants also showed significant improvement in the positive direction of attitudes toward healthy relationships (Adler-Baeder, Lucier, et al., 2008).

The Oklahoma Marriage Initiative (OMI) began in 1999 and is the longest running healthy marriage initiative in the United States. The OMI has offered couple and relationship education through clergy, therapists, and professionals, including the Oklahoma CES. The research reports for the evaluation of this project include process evaluations about what was learned from the project, but do not include impact evaluations. A major part of the process findings were reported in terms of dissemination of CRE: the OMI reached 122,134 individuals through 7,078 workshops by the end of 2007, and it reached nearly every county of the state (Dion et al., 2008). The authors suggested future evaluation to determine the ultimate impact such as reductions in divorce, number of children who live with their parents in a healthy marriage, and assessment of the change in attitudes and norms. The evaluation of any impact on divorce rates, non-marital childbearing, and attitudes are likely to take time (Dion et al., 2008).
**Utah’s healthy marriage initiative.** In 2002, the Utah Department of Workforce Services (DWS) teamed with Utah State University (USU) CES (CES) to promote healthy marriages and reduce divorce rates. The UtahMarriage.org website was created, which provides research-based information about healthy relationships, and includes information about local workshops and courses about marriage preparation. USU CES has also provided an online marriage preparation class available to the public. They conducted a survey of 1,010 newlywed couples in Utah about relationships, and also conducted the *Marriage in Utah: 2003 Baseline Statewide Survey on Marriage and Divorce* using a random sample of 1,316 adults in Utah (Schramm, Marshall, Harris, & George, 2003). The survey suggests that while many people believe that CRE would be helpful, very few people have utilized CRE resources (Goddard & Olsen, 2004).

Beginning in 2009, the Utah DWS collaborated with USU CES to offer couple and relationship education (Higginbotham, Skogrand, & Bradford, 2009). All extension agents who submitted proposals to implement relationship strengthening education in their own counties received either full or partial funding. They were given freedom to choose the activities that they wanted to do, provided the activities fit within the grant guidelines.

**Cooperative Extension and Couple and Relationship Education**

Because CES has historically been actively involved in education for families, it is potentially a good fit for providing CRE (Goddard & Olsen, 2004). The foundation for CES was laid with the establishment of land-grant universities throughout the nation with the purpose of educating citizens about agriculture, home economics, and other practical
professions; CES was formalized in 1914. While CES’ mission is still to “extend” research to the public to meet local needs, the focus has shifted from helping farmers and homemakers to including current needs of urban lifestyles. Today CES offer programs in 4-H Youth Development, agriculture, leadership development, natural resources, family and consumer sciences (formally home economics), and community and economic development (United States Department of Agriculture, 2009). There are over 100 land-grant colleges and universities (United States Department of Agriculture, 2009), with approximately 3,150 offices located throughout the United States (Goddard & Olsen, 2004).

There are extension offices in each of the 28 counties throughout the state of Utah. Each county office has extension agents whose role is to disseminate research-based information in their specialized area. FCS agents hold bachelor’s or master’s degrees and have background and skills in child development, nutrition and health, family finance, clothing, environmental issues, and community development. Their typical activities include teaching classes and workshops, recording radio and television shows or public service announcements, writing newspaper articles, and collaborating with other community agencies to advance the quality of life of diverse county residents (United States Department of Agriculture, 2009).

**Successes and Barriers to Couple and Relationship Education**

Although CRE has been shown to be effective in general, there is still much that is unknown about healthy relationship initiatives. Because process evaluation of such initiatives is still in the early stages, healthy relationship initiative program practices have
drawn upon what is known about traditional CRE and recommendations of scholars. For example, some programs have adapted traditional CRE curricula to target more diverse audiences, and programs rely heavily upon the use of collaboration with community organizations. Preliminary process evaluations have been conducted about the OMI as well as the CHMI’s that have been conducted in Grand Rapids, Michigan; Nampa, Idaho; and a report has been written to compile the Massachusetts, Florida, and Illinois community initiatives (Bir, Greene, et al., 2005; Bir, Pilkauskas, et al., 2005; Joshi, Pilkauskas, Bir, & Lerman, 2008). These evaluations include successes and barriers but do not include outcome evaluations.

There are unique challenges to providing healthy relationship education, and perhaps even more challenges when providing these services to low-income and culturally diverse populations (NHMRC, 2009) such as community and collaboration factors, and recruitment and retention. It is notable that although there is some information about the implementation of healthy relationship initiatives, research about such initiatives is still in the early stages and often does not address the involvement of CES in these initiatives. Therefore, this study may be helpful in exploring ways in which CRE can be delivered through CES. The following paragraphs discuss research about success and barriers in CRE and how these were also experienced in the implementation of healthy relationship initiatives.

**Community factors.** Community involvement in planning couple and relationship education programs is as important to successful program implementation as is community involvement in delivering these programs (Futris, 2007). Even so, obtaining this local support can be a challenge (Olsen & Shirer, 2007) because of
competing demands for community projects, differing opinions, power and control issues, and boundary issues (Carlton, Whiting, Bradford, Dyk, & Vail, 2009; Futris, 2007). The level of community support for programs and community members’ assumptions about CRE are important in program planning (Olsen & Shirer, 2007).

In order to gain local support, scholars suggest working with a coalition or partnership that is representative of the community (Futris, 2007). Coalitions or collaborations should involve all relevant stakeholders, including those who are not in favor the program (Futris, 2007; Olsen & Shirer, 2007) and the target audience (Futris, 2007). These groups will help to identify the strengths and diverse needs of the community (Futris, 2007; Olsen & Shirer, 2007), ensure that programs are a good fit for the community, and create a sense of community commitment towards the programs (Futris, 2007).

Providers in the OMI (Dion et al., 2008) learned that implementation of a program will be most successful when there is a good fit between the missions of the initiative and the agency, when there is high motivation for the agency to succeed, when the curriculum is a good fit for the needs and interest of the agency’s clients, and when there is a reliable source of participants. They also learned about the necessity for buy-in of the staff and an ability to overcome resistance to focusing on marriage programs. For example, the Family and Consumer Science classes in Oklahoma’s high schools were a good fit for implementation of such programs due to the established mission of the FCS classes in providing CRE (Dion et al., 2008).

**Collaboration factors.** Community partnerships are advantageous for CRE initiatives because they draw a community together through common goals and pool
social capital in order to effectively reach individuals and couples through various avenues (Futris, 2007). Successful collaborations involve shared vision (Carlton et al., 2009), strategic planning and action (Futris, 2007; Skogrand & Shirer, 2007), clearly defined role expectations (Carlton et al., 2009), and competent leadership of the program leader (Futris, 2007). The leader should be able to develop clear objectives, facilitate continued planning adaptive to community needs, provide support to staff, and cultivate relationships of trust and communication between stakeholders and collaborators (Futris, 2007).

Ironically, the characteristics of collaborations that add to their success (such as differing opinions and experiences) may also present challenges that need to be overcome. Program implementation and collaboration involves many normal demands and additional stressors that may occur such as staff changes, conflicts of interest, and other problems. Because these stresses may pile up, it is important that collaborators be resilient, flexible, and able to keep balance in their roles and responsibilities (Carlton et al., 2009).

**Recruitment and retention.** Collaboration has also been offered as a suggestion for combating the long noted difficulty of recruitment and retention of participants for CRE programming (Larson, 2004; Ooms & Wilson, 2004). Between one-third to one-quarter of marrying couples and fewer cohabitating couples participate in CRE (Halford, 2004). Additionally, many CRE programs do not reach those who need it most and who are most likely to benefit from it: those people with risk factors for problems in their relationships (Larson, 2004) yet are underrepresented in CRE (Halford, O’Donnell, Lizzio, & Wilson, 2006). Recruiting and retaining low-income or diverse populations
can be especially challenging (Ooms & Wilson, 2004). Additionally, because many experienced CRE providers are not familiar with working with culturally diverse and low-income audiences, they may have difficulty adapting their programs to these audiences. They may also have difficulty in sustaining funding that is necessary to serve low-income populations (NHMRC, 2009).

Consequently, scholars and experienced CRE providers recommend that CRE be offered in varying forms of intensities, that it be integrated into existing services, and offered along-side or in collaboration with other services for the target population (Halford, 2004; Hawkins et al., 2004; Markman et al., 2004; Ooms & Wilson, 2004; Skogrand & Shirer, 2007) such as mental health (Doherty, 2005), substance abuse, employment assistance, fatherhood programs, job training and placement, and assistance with child support (Ooms & Wilson, 2004). Relationship educators can also recruit participants from or partner with programs that offer programs such as nutrition education or money management. Programs should be offered at a convenient time and place, and in a familiar setting (Ooms & Wilson, 2004; Skogrand & Shirer, 2007), and use former successful program participants as recruiters (Ooms & Wilson, 2004).

There are many advantages to partnering with well-established organizations that serve diverse and low-income populations (NHMRC, 2009). These organizations are often experienced in recruiting and serving these populations and have well-established collaborations with other organizations in the community, making cross recruitment and cross referral possible. They also may have experience dealing with issues such as domestic violence, drug abuse, or mental health (NHMRC, 2009).
While offering CRE through collaboration has been recommended and proven to be successful in the dissemination of CRE, it also presents some complexities and challenges to be overcome. These challenges involve collaboration between agencies, working with diverse populations, different missions of various organizations, and recruitment difficulties (NHMRC, 2009). Additionally, experienced organizations that are accustomed to serving these populations may find it difficult to recruit or serve a couple or an entire family and to meet their needs (NHMRC, 2009). Because their services generally do not focus on healthy relationships, they may have difficulty or show resistance in adapting their programs to teach concepts about healthy marriage relationships (NHMRC, 2009).

While collaborative efforts are beneficial, the OMI and the CHMI’s all faced recruitment and retention challenges (Bir, Greene, et al., 2005; Bir, Pilkauskas, et al., 2005; Dion et al., 2008; Joshi et al., 2008). The OMI successfully recruited among high schools and TANF recipients but had difficulty in recruiting beyond already existing clientele (Dion et al., 2008). The combined Massachusetts, Florida, and Illinois projects reported challenges recruiting diverse couples (Joshi et al., 2008). The Nampa project had trouble with recruitment and found that referrals from agencies do not guarantee participation in programming (Bir, Pilkauskas, et al., 2005). Halford (2004) found that many couples did not feel the need for CRE, saw relationship education as being for people with problems, or thought that CRE had the potential to cause problems that do not already exist (Halford, 2004). Some also found CRE to be too intrusive for private relationships. Additionally, older couples may have seen CRE as being for less experienced couples or for those who were very religious (Halford, 2004). Even so,
further research is needed to know why people who would benefit from CRE do not participate (Bir, Greene, et al., 2005).

The Grand Rapids CHMI was able to recruit participants from well-established programs and thus forego expensive advertising efforts such as media campaigns and focus efforts elsewhere (Bir, Greene, et al., 2005). While the project has been able to get almost 700 people to attend at least one class, relatively few of the participants are men, and only 1/6 of the participants attend as couples. While retention has been fairly high compared to other programs of this kind, many participants do not attend all of the classes (Bir, Greene, et al., 2005). Because people of varying SES levels and cultures have different values, researchers have found that some low SES and diverse populations did not attend or may have dropped out of a program because they felt that it did not meet their needs, they did not understand, or they mistrusted middle-class institutions (Ernst, 1990; Ooms & Wilson, 2004). The researchers in the Grand Rapids CHMI suggested further research to find out why participants do not continue. They suspect that a continuing challenge will be adapting to fit the needs of all the organizational partners and expanding the classes to be able to serve more people (Bir, Greene, et al., 2005).

**Purposes of the Study**

Evaluations of healthy relationship initiatives are in the very early stages, and these evaluations for the most part do not include programs that involve CES. Relatively little is known about the process of CES agents in delivering CRE, particularly in reaching diverse audiences. However, because CES professional roles include collaboration with community organizations and meeting the needs of diverse audiences,
CES agents may be uniquely prepared to implement CRE. More information is needed about agents’ experiences in implementing CRE.

**Research Questions**

In keeping with phenomenological theory, two simple research questions were asked based on FCS extension agents’ experiences in Utah’s Healthy Relationship Initiative:

1. What were the successes that extension agents experienced in implementing couple and relationship education?
2. What were the challenges to implementation?
CHAPTER III
METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to qualitatively identify and examine FCS extension agents’ successes and barriers to the dissemination of couple and relationship education in the Utah Healthy Relationship Initiative. This chapter will explain the design, sample, measures, procedure, and data analysis.

Design

The study used a qualitative phenomenological research approach to explore the experiences of FCS extension agents in Utah to answer the research questions stated previously. This approach is used when a researcher wishes to identify themes and meanings among the experiences of a group of people who have undergone similar things (Creswell, 2007). Phenomenological theory focuses on lived experiences of individuals who have experienced a common phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Although the focus is initially on individual experience and the telling of individual stories, phenomenological inquiry focuses on the “essence” of the shared human experience. For example, a phenomenologist may study individuals who experienced grief or insomnia, or the feeling of being left out. After data are collected the researcher constructs a description of the experience, including descriptions of what the experience was and how it was experienced. Phenomenology is rooted in philosophy, in that it focuses on the meaning of lived experiences of individuals and postpones judgments about reality until there is a
defining body of evidence. It is often used in fields including sociology, psychology, and education (Creswell, 2007).

This study used what is known as empirical, transcendental, or psychological phenomenology (Creswell, 2007). In this approach researchers first identify a phenomenon that highly interests them. They next set aside their own experience as much as possible and approach the subject as if they are looking at it for the first time. The researchers then collect data from several individuals who have lived or experienced the phenomenon, then analyze the data by choosing significant statements and quotes that emerge into themes. Researchers use these themes to write about the experiences of the participants and the context in which they experienced it, and then write an overall description of the essence of the experience. More specific steps will be described in the procedures section. This phenomenological research approach was helpful in understanding agents’ successes and barriers in the implementation of couple and relationship education.

Sample

Subjects for this study included 14 FCS extension agents who were funded as county project leaders in the Utah Healthy Relationship initiative to provide couple and relationship education. These agents offered CRE during September, 2009 to June, 2010. There were 13 female FCS agents and 1 male agent. All agents held Master’s degrees from accredited universities and were employees of Utah State University. One of the FCS agents had an appointment solely as an FCS agent. Time for three of the agents was partitioned between FCS, 4-H, and the role of county director. Two of the agents were also county directors but were not involved in 4-H, and eight of the agents’ roles included
FCS and 4-H. Two agents from two different counties partnered together to provide services in their two counties. Nine of the agents worked in rural counties, and five agents worked in urban counties. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2010), 10 of the counties had Latino populations above 7%, ranging from 7.9% to 16.3% of the population. One county had 54.3% of a population of Navajo Native Americans. Further demographic details regarding the counties are included in Appendix C.

**Instruments**

The study included two different instruments used to collect data to explore the FCS agents’ successes and barriers in the implementation of CRE. These are the *agent demographic* form and the *technical and support feedback* form. These instruments are included in Appendix A.

**Agent demographic form.** The agents filled out a short form that asked questions about their income and background (see Appendix A). This form included employment information such as years of experience, how many full-time employees they had working on the project, and the percentage of time that they spend in the area of family relationships.

**Technical and support feedback form.** Throughout the grant year, the Extension agents provided quarterly data to the principal investigators of the project. As part of the quarterly report, Extension agents filled out a technical and support feedback form. Two questions asked: “What successes have you had?” and “What barriers have you encountered?” This measure is in line with the phenomenological approach as described by Creswell (2007), in which researchers ask participants broad, open-ended, general questions that help researchers to gather data about the subjects’ experiences.
**Procedure**

Three co-principal investigators from Utah State University oversaw the Utah Healthy Relationship Initiative. Their primary duties were requesting and evaluating proposals, providing technical support, tracking progress of the project, and evaluating the project’s processes and outcomes. Approval from Utah State University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) was already obtained to gather data from a *technical and support feedback* form that extension agents completed with each quarterly report that they sent to the principal investigators. Quarters one through four were completed in October, 2009, January, 2010, April, 2010, and July, 2010, respectively. This IRB approval (see Appendix B) was obtained in order to make sure that the study was ethical, conducted in a proper manner, and that the study would not cause harm to the participants.

**Data Analysis**

This study analyzed data from quarters one through four (October, 2009, January, 2010, April, 2010, and July, 2010). A phenomenological procedure was used to analyze the data with the following steps: two investigators immersed themselves in the data, searching for and highlighting significant statements or quotes that explained the agents’ experiences. This step is referred to as horizontalization (Creswell, 2007). Next, the investigators grouped similar statements into categories to allow themes and meaning to emerge from the data. The investigators came together to agree upon themes. The investigators separately coded the data and then came together to compare data. Inter-rater reliability was calculated by rating ‘agreement’ or ‘disagreement’ of the two coders
sentence by sentence. For the successes theme, the coders reached an inter-rater reliability of 83%. Discrepancies were then discussed until full consensus was reached. The same process was repeated for the challenges theme, which had an interrater reliability rate of 95%. Again, discrepancies were discussed until the coders came to a complete consensus. Next, these data were grouped into categories that described the agents’ experiences. This is referred to as a textural description (Creswell, 2007). The investigator also used the grouped data to describe how the context or setting influenced how the agents experienced the successes and barriers. This is referred to as the imaginative variation or structural description (Creswell, 2007).

The investigator next wrote about her own experiences with the project and how the context and situations influenced the experience of the project. The investigator then drew upon both the textural and structural descriptions to compile a description that portrays the “essence” or meaning of the agents’ experiences, referred to as the essential, invariant structure, or essence (Creswell, 2007). The final step of analysis discusses the meaning of the combined experiences of the extension agents, and presents readers with what it means to have experienced the project as a whole. For example, agents may have experienced successes and barriers in similar ways even if the barriers were different (Creswell, 2007).
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

This chapter discusses the findings in two separate categories. The first section discusses the successes that the agents had in the implementation of CRE. The second section discusses their challenges. In keeping with phenomenological methodology, findings are listed collectively to represent the experiences of the agents as a whole, although individual quotes are mentioned as illustrative of overlapping experience. The numbers of agents who discussed major themes and subthemes is listed. For clarity, Summit and Wasatch agents are spoken about as one agent, since the two agents partnered together and only one feedback form was turned in for their project. Therefore, for purposes of this chapter the total number of agents will be thought of as thirteen, instead of the fourteen actual agents who worked on the project.

Successes

Three themes emerged from the data that agents shared about successes. These were resources, outcomes, and attendance/participation. The resources theme included collaborations, or organizations that agents partnered with to carry out their projects, and resources that agents accessed without the help of collaborative partners. The outcomes theme describes positive results of the programs for participants and staff, and for the future of CRE. Attendance/participation refers to the number of people that participated in the projects. Each theme can be broken into subthemes, explained in following sections of the paper.
Resources. All thirteen agents talked about resources in some way. The theme of resources generally included partnerships with individuals and organizations that could help them to reach out to their communities. Agents also discussed resources that they had access to without the help of collaborative partners, such as already-established advertising methods and on-site staff.

Collaborative partners. Eleven of the agents talked about collaborative partners as critical to their projects. Agents were required in the grant RFP to form new partnerships and rely on existing partnerships in order to provide CRE in their respective counties. Often these partnerships had developed over the years and had become reliable resources to help agents reach participants and provide for the needs of the community. However, some of these partnerships were newly formed with the implementation of the current programs. Agents formed partnerships with social service agencies, businesses, interagency councils, government services, healthcare/therapists, religious groups, and schools/universities. In some counties the projects were extensive, so they formed coalitions made up of many different community organizations. Other counties did not have a coalition and only had a small number of partnerships.

In the beginning stages of the project, some agents counted the initial formation of partnerships or meeting with a coalition as successes. This involved establishing new relationships with organizations or individuals that worked with their potential audience. Often these partnerships were beneficial for the collaborators as well since they were bringing new resources to their existing audiences. They reported successes such as arranging meeting times and gaining new partnerships. They also felt that networking with their partnerships would be “valuable” and “bring excellent results” as their projects
gained momentum. Local buy-in was described as “extremely positive” and “resulted in successful community level programming and participation.” This support from community organizations was extremely important to the agents’ success in all stages of the project.

Partners brought new ideas and different perspectives to the project. As agents met with their collaborative partners or coalitions, they were able to collectively brainstorm ideas to adapt activities to meet grant guidelines and community needs. Together the agents and partners were able to coordinate possible dates for events and activities, plan menu ideas, and find ways to publicize events. For example, one county coalition agreed upon the importance of building a blog to promote awareness of the relationship strengthening event in their community.

Because collaborative partners were supportive of the CRE programs, they brought other resources to the programs, such as program incentives, locations for classes, and instructors for classes. For example, one school’s parent group was “so excited” about a one-time marriage class that “the principal covered the refreshments for them that night (Feb 11) and allowed [the agent] to teach at the school.”

Collaborative partner support also helped agents to be able to teach more classes because they were able to reach participants that they would not have had access to without the partnerships. Once collaborative partners were excited about the programs, they were often eager to take these programs to individuals within their reach, and were willing to go the extra mile to do so. High schools and junior highs allowed agents to teach curriculum in their classes, organizations provided information to people on their
mailing lists, and agencies that worked with low-income individuals advertised to their clients. For example, an agent shared,

The [county] Housing Authority Self Sufficiency Program coordinator was very excited to have her clients learn good communication skills and money management techniques to use with spouses, partners, and kids. She sent program flyers out to all FSS clients. In addition the Parents as Teachers program, the Teen & Kids programs…. Estimated at least 300 flyers were out for each of the two classes taught at [the county’s] Housing Authority.

These partnerships also allowed for access to low-income and culturally diverse audiences because they had connections to and understanding of these audiences that the agents themselves did not already have. Although only one of the agents worked closely with a Native American population, this agent’s experiences illustrate this process. She said, “Our greatest success was forming strong working partnerships with two significant organizations within two [Native American] communities. These collaborations provided not only cultural insights, but also opportunities to reach participants from the [Native American] Nation.” Because of this partnership, this agent was able to recruit a Native American instructor that already worked with the Native American community, which was able to give the program “increased credibility.” The agent said that the instructor “not only referred couples into the class, but also lent his reputation, knowledge, expertise, and culturally-based humor to keep participants engaged through tears and laughter.” For the Native American classes, the agent was able to utilize a curriculum specifically tailored to the needs of Native Americans which was developed from a study about strong marriages in this culture. Collaboration with the Native American
population also helped to reach participants by providing lunch and classes for them during their lunch break at work.

Working with other organizations and individuals also brought an added dimension of expertise and information to the participants. For example, one agent’s partnership with the FoodSense program “augmented opportunities for value-added activities” by helping participants learn about nutrition and the possibilities of integrating healthy relationships with healthy eating (e.g., planning and preparing meals together; sharing meals in families). The Nutrition Education Assistant also helped prepare meals for their events. Another agent was able to “provide educational techniques and tools as well as information to the [Family and Consumer Science] teachers throughout Utah and seven other states on how to teach teens about the financial issues in marriage.”

**Agent resources.** Six of the agents talked about resources that were not in connection with collaborative partners. These were resources that the agents already had access to or gained access to without the help of collaborations or new partnerships. Some of these resources were resources that they had already used for other programs, such as mailing lists and staff members. Initial successes also included arranging for appropriate facilities and quality speakers, completing the required domestic violence prevention training, and advertisement efforts of staff members. Some of the later successes included things that helped with attendance and participation, such as the “ability to get the word out to [county] residents through [a] newsletter and news release outlets.” Agents used their already established Extension lists as well as other forms of advertisement to recruit participants.
Other successes that were identified included agents’ contribution to the programs such as curricula, incentives, and flexibility. For example, one agent created marriage punch cards with various activities that the couples complete together; he felt that this program was particularly successful. After couples completed ten of the activities they could bring them back to the Extension office and receive a 10-dollar stipend. This agent felt that, “The marriage punch cards were successful because the couples had to complete at least 10 activities together.” “We printed about 300 of the cards and I’m just about out of them already.”

One agent was “excited about becoming certified in the PICK A Partner curriculum.” This agent said, “I found it very insightful and can’t wait to teach it.” Other agents used incentives to get people to participate, such as childcare reimbursement stipends for parents who attended the class. One agent even “…helped pay for a marriage license of [the] first pre-married couple who attended all of the sessions (7 classes).” This agent went to the reception of this couple and found other couples from the class there to support the couple. Another agent resource was the ability to be flexible in scheduling programs when all did not go as planned. Other resources that many agents had mentioned were staff. Many talked about their great staff members who helped with programs or who stepped in when outside sources could not be found or when formerly committed individuals could no longer assist with the programs.

Outcomes. All 13 agents talked about outcomes, which related to perpetuation of programs, positive participant outcomes in terms of skills and knowledge gained and changed behaviors, positive feedback received from participants about the programs, and
staff outcomes of either excitement or learning experiences that they gained from this project.

*Awareness led to perpetuation of programs.* One subtheme that emerged from agents’ experiences was that of perpetuation of programs. Ten of the agents reported that their programs led to more awareness about the need for CRE, interest in relationship education, and even a shift in community attitudes. Successful programs led to expansion of programs and the ability to form or continue partnerships with community organizations. For example, many agents received ongoing support from collaborative partners, and some mentioned that their partners were excited for the next year’s programs.

The positive publicity that the programs received, either through newspapers or through the programs themselves, led to increased awareness of, interest, and support for CRE. For example, one agent’s article about the longest married couples in their county “… was featured on the front page of the newspaper that goes to every household in the county.” In another county, the reporter from the community paper who interviewed the participants stayed to attend the class and “was most impressed with the comments.” In another county, the marriage week celebration’s popular speaker created visibility for the existing marriage coalition, whose members were motivated to get an equally popular speaker for the next year’s marriage celebration.

The execution of the programs themselves helped to create awareness. In one county, high school student body officers shared a relationship tip of the day with the entire student body, who were then invited to enter an essay contest about healthy
relationships. The agent shared one student body officer’s reflection about results of this program:

One of the greatest results of the entire month, from the tips of the day and essay contest to the assembly was raising awareness of how we as students are treating each other. We know that if we continued to raise awareness throughout our school and community we could make progress towards ending unhealthy relationships.

This awareness of the importance of healthy relationships even led to a shift in some communities’ attitude toward CRE. Other evidences of this shift were demonstrated by individuals and libraries purchasing or requesting recommended books about CRE and by participants requesting future classes and telling their friends and family members about the benefits of the programs. An agent said, “We …cannot keep up with the demands for relationship-building/strengthening activities.”

Because of the programs, agents became seen as a credible resource for CRE. One organization called the agent seeking information for an employee who was having marital difficulties.

[A human resources manager] called after the classes there asking for additional information for one employee having marital difficulties and felt our materials would be helpful for him and his wife in a couple’s getaway weekend. So we are now seen as a good resource for information for the employees there.

Agents’ experiences show that “people and organizations are recognizing the need for this type of education in our communities.” Furthermore, successful programming helped to expand CRE programs and also created opportunities to form or continue
partnerships with community organizations. One agent “[believed] that all activities have been successful and lead-ins for future activities.” Agents were able to train individuals or organizations about CRE so that more people could be reached. It was evident that much of this was due to collaborative partners’ desires to continue partnerships or expand programs. For example, an agent described the response of an ecclesiastical leader after a class about marriage and money was given to individuals in his congregation: “This congregation leader felt the class was so helpful that he has asked for the class to be repeated later in the year for those who could not attend that evening.”

Another agent was able to form a partnership with a school district because a teacher saw a flyer about the programs. This agent shared the following:

The success of the “no jerks” classes in the high schools has been phenomenal. A teacher in the community saw the flyer and asked that I teach the class to her classes and this collaboration has resulted in a newspaper article and several other teaching opportunities in the school district to some of the most at-risk youth that could really benefit from the information…We are anticipating ongoing partnerships to continue teaching youth in the schools next year.

**Participant outcomes.** The majority of agents stated that their programs helped individuals and couples with their relationships. Eight of the agents talked specifically about positive participant outcomes. One agent shared, “It’s fun to watch how much a husband and wife bond together when they are playful with each other.” Individuals of all ages gained important skills and knowledge that would help them in their relationships or future relationships. Some of the agents taught youth who were at-risk for relationship problems. One agent said, “I think this class helped them to recognize certain behaviors,
emotions, trust issues, etc.” Perhaps this was a beginning point for youth who are confused about relationships to begin to recognize the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships.

Because they knew their audience and had perhaps struggled reaching at-risk audiences in the past, such as low-income youth and their families, it was significant to the agents that participants seemed to enjoy the activities. For example, “They seemed to really like the information on communicating which is so important to handling money successfully in a marriage.”

Some agents included participant comments about the positive impact that these programs had on them. In a positive reflection activity, one adult shared how these activities reminded them of why they fell in love with each other and helped rekindle the flame:

I realized the time spent “dating” keeps our boyfriend/girlfriend status more intact and I remember why we fell in love. When our dating time is amiss, he starts becoming that “roommate” that leaves me dirty laundry and dishes to clean up after instead of the man I fell in love with. Dating re-establishes our interest in each other and I’m so glad we participated.

**Positive feedback.** Five of the agents talked about the successes of their programs in terms of positive feedback that they received either from the participants themselves, or on the evaluation forms. Individuals and families gave very positive feedback to the agents, and thanked them for offering the classes. “Throughout the evening we were thanked continuously for putting on the event and [told us] we should do this every year.” Participants were also appreciative that different programs offered childcare or meals, or
that the program provided a relaxing, family-friendly atmosphere that would allow them time with their spouse and their children. Agents shared participant comments such as this: “Powerful, we need more classes like this.”

**Agent outcomes.** Four of the agents shared statements of success that were staff outcomes. These were things such as enjoying the project and the associated learning experiences. For example: “I had a great time visiting with the oldest married couples. They were very appreciative and honored.” This agent also expressed appreciation for being able to receive CRE training and information that could be shared with youth. Agents also expressed satisfaction with programs and anticipated the results of future programming: “We can’t wait to see what the evaluations reveal!” Agents also felt that their programs were successful and helping people in the community. “I believe the program we are now providing is meeting the needs of the community.”

**Attendance/participation.** Twelve of the agents talked about the theme of attendance/participation. This referred to numbers of people recruited to and attending the programs, reaching a target audience, and individuals’ enthusiasm before or during program participation.

**Numbers.** Eleven of the agents talked about successes in terms of numbers of people whom they had recruited or who had participated in programs. Initially, agents were excited about the number of people that were already signed up, prior to the event. For example, one agent was “delighted that 20 people [had] registered for the workshops via online registration and another 20 people in person in [the] office. Another agent shared, “Just by word of mouth (we hadn’t even gotten our promotional flyers out yet), we have 15 couples signed up for the Valentine’s Event.”
As the project continued, some agents talked about growing numbers or building success, and being able to count on an average number of people each week to be there to attend the classes. For example, one of the classes “remained consistent with an average of 27 participants at each class.” In another county, “seven couples attended 4 or more sessions.” According to one agent, “People are attending classes as anticipated based on previous events.”

Agents were able to extend programming to a large group of people or a variety of different audiences in the community. The agents reached high school students to adults of varying incomes. The “Healthy Dating and Relationship” essay contest is one example of how youth were involved. The agent reached adults through the relationship event held for the entire county. Another agent reached “a variety of county citizens including dating and couples, parents, low income households, young professional single adults, Family & Consumer Science secondary school educators from 8 states, and employees in a business setting.” The agent was also able to teach a refugee family from Africa through classes offered by the local housing authority.

For some agents, program participation seemed to be high, even exceeding their expectations. One program “had 125 people attend and almost ran out of room and food for them.” Another county “had a better-than-expected turnout to most events.”

**Target audience.** Five of the agents talked about reaching a target audience who were especially in need of information about healthy relationships, including at-risk youth, culturally diverse audiences such as Native Americans, refugees, and low-income participants. Agents seemed thrilled to be able to “reach many at-risk [individuals]” who “needed the…information desperately” with “valuable relationship education materials.”
They shared this excitement by describing the needs of the participants that attended their classes. Agents described participants’ needs in terms such as “low income,” “struggling to make ends meet,” “low self esteem,” and “confused about relationships.” For example, “From the discussions, it is easy to tell how confused kids are about relationships and what a healthy relationship should look like…They are concerned about going off to college and dating there.”

**Enthusiasm/interest.** Four agents talked about interest and enthusiasm before the activities began, and interest and participation during the activities. For example, one agent shared, “Reaching youth has been a fun success for me. I can see their wheels turning as I [am] teaching them about the different ways couples bond with each other. They listen intently and ask thoughtful questions, so I know that they are processing the information.” Agents were also pleased that they were able to get men to participate and that many of the participants turned in the evaluation surveys.

**Challenges**

All agents reported many challenges or barriers that they experienced in the implementation of CRE programs. Analyses of these challenges yielded two different themes: participant-related challenges and resource-related challenges.

**Participant-related challenges.** All thirteen agents talked about participant-related challenges including recruitment and attendance of participants, and challenges of providing programming for the culturally diverse or those with special needs. There was a phenomenon of agents listing barriers but then mulling over things that they could do to get more people to attend or to better tailor the programs to participants’ needs. This
cognitive process of trying to figure out what needed to happen next occurred across most participant-related challenges.

**Recruitment and attendance.** Eleven agents talked about the challenge of recruitment and attendance. Many agents described struggles in getting people to sign up or to keep participants in the classes. While 39% of the activities were one-time events, 26% of the programs included recurring activities of 2-7 sessions, and 35% of the activities were not specified in duration, but were one- or two-time events. One quarter of the events were recurring activities, therefore it is not surprising that agents would be concerned about retaining participants. Agents also talked about participant issues that may keep them away from classes such as time, perception of marriage classes, and participant characteristics.

**Low numbers.** Although many agents had talked about successes with participation, some of the same agents found it to be challenging. Eight of the agents talked about the challenge of having enough people to attend their activities or classes. One agent said, “We would like to see more people attend events. It is an ongoing struggle to continually recruit more participants…” Some agents struggled with getting people to register for their programs. For example, one agent, who reported that the staff and community struggled with getting used to a new registration system, speculated that this was perhaps the reason that a class had to be cancelled due to low numbers.

However, classes were not cancelled solely because of struggles with registration. Agents found that “… despite verbal support…individuals have not been attending as they stated they would.” Even when people had preregistered for classes, some agents had to cancel, “temporarily discontinue,” or reschedule some classes because of low
numbers. Even when events were not cancelled due to low enrollment, agents struggled with participants following through with their commitments, such as attending all classes in a series or turning in evaluations. The fluctuating numbers of participants may have been due to lack of participant commitment. One agent shared that their events varied from 10-30 participants each week. The agent added, “It is difficult to plan each week for this difference.” Another concern was getting people to attend a series of classes rather than just one event. One agent, mulling over this, said,

Another barrier has been getting people to attend a series of classes. [Taking] classes in a series can produce a continuity of education and support couples making changes in their relationships. One-time only classes are great and can give nuggets of information but may not influence much change. How do we get a group of people to attend a series of relationship classes successfully?

However they talked about it, lack of numbers was a pervasive challenge for the agents.

Agents seemed frustrated that despite great efforts that they had made to advertise the programs, they still struggled to get people, especially low-income audiences, to attend their classes. In the final quarter of the project, one agent reported fewer barriers, but still “the same frustrations of reaching the community.” Another agent, after exhausting known resources, said, “We would like ideas for better advertising strategies in the future. We advertised in the media, newsletters, flyers, county email, advertising in classes, postcards, libraries, worked with other agencies to co-partner but still had limited enrollment at some sites.”

Participant time. Eight agents felt that participant’s time was a barrier from getting them to attend. This challenge included competing in terms of scheduling with
the many events that are already offered in the community. Because agents were aware of people’s busy schedules, they tried to schedule classes around other community events that may have conflicted with people’s schedules, but still had difficulty finding a good time to hold the events. For one agent, it seemed “there is so much going on right now” that “it has been hard to find a good night to hold the couple’s communication class.”

After the programs, agents reflected about factors that may have caused low attendance to their programs. These varied from other commitments to the time of the class to even the time of year. One agent reflected, “The spring time always seems to be a challenge for attendance in marriage classes. People are interested, but very busy during the spring.”

Agents found that scheduling was an ongoing challenge, and suggested things that they might do differently to make the workshops more appealing for people with busy schedules. For one county this meant shortening their day-long workshop to one day and holding workshops at a convenient time and avoiding Saturdays. Another agent proposed changing their program and teaming up with another event to offer less formal or structured relationship building activities alongside other activities at this event.

*Perception of couple and relationship education.* Four agents felt that trouble in getting participants to attend programs was due to the newness of the programs or the perception that people had of CRE. “Because this is our first series of marriage classes,” one agent said, “we have noticed that getting people to sign-up is not as easy as with our other Extension classes. However, we will prove ourselves in time and these workshops will become as popular as our other workshops. We just know it!” Perhaps the word just had not caught yet. In another county, “Some individuals mentioned they still ‘weren’t
quite sure what this really was’ and were a bit hesitant to come.” Two agents agreed that men may not like to attend these kinds of classes. One agent mulled over this problem of the perception of CRE:

Marriage classes aren’t normally ones people jump to sign up for. It takes creativity, incentives, and collaboration to get people to come. I’m still figuring out the best way to get people interested and collaborate with community partners that will sustain these programs over time.

*Target audience participation.* Two agents said that their greatest challenge was getting at-risk audiences to attend their programs. This is because “these low income and at-risk audiences have so many other issues to deal with that relationships and communication is not high on their priority list.” Although activities had been created with the intent to draw low-income audiences, these agents also mused about ways that they could get them to come more. Ideas ranged from offering more incentives to offering programs that appeal to their target audience rather than to mid- or high-income couples. For example, an agent shared,

One of the biggest challenges I have faced so far is getting more of the at-risk population to attend the classes. So far, our classes have been fun, inexpensive date nights (couples cooking classes included) which draw couples who are educated, have higher-than-average incomes, and typically are doing fine in their relationships but want to learn more. We are hoping that the 4-H Family Conference brings in families who can utilize information on communication, finances, and parenting together, but we don’t know yet how many will come.
**Target audience barriers.** Four agents came across barriers to implementation of CRE programs that were related to participant characteristics. Generally, these were in low-income or culturally diverse audiences. Language and culture were significant barriers to being able to give effective instruction. One county needed a Native American interpreter because some participants did not speak any English. Because the interpreter was only able to attend one class, volunteers helped at the next classes, but “after the first three classes, there were no non-English speaking participants.” The agent speculated that this could be because the instruction was in English, or due to “a White person teaching [Native American] people about the [Native American] culture, versus a [Native American] educator sharing [Native American] teachings.” This was a challenge even though the agent was able to utilize a curriculum specifically tailored to the needs of Native Americans which was developed from a study about great marriages in this culture.

Another agent had refugee participants who had limited English skills who attended with other participants. This agent said that this “made the teaching quite difficult...as their culture and their understanding of English [have] hampered their understanding of the concepts we have prepared to share.” Another agent had to guess how many people would come to the Latino marriage classes because, according to the agent, “[The Latino] culture does not preregister for an event.” In addition, an agent had to obtain additional childcare providers because a couple brought two children with disabilities without prior notice, and these children needed individual attention.

**Resource-related challenges.** Twelve of the agents talked about challenges relating to their resources, or the lack thereof, or challenges in collaborating with
community organizations. This theme included limitations of time, challenges working with collaborative partners, difficulties finding cultural materials and instructors, and other resources such as money and staff. Eight of the agents talked about scarcity of resources or scarcity of money or staffing problems.

**Time.** Eight of the agents talked about time in terms of the time required for planning and carrying out programs. Because agents have “so many varied responsibilities,” they sometimes had trouble “just trying to fit everything in.” This barrier was “not new” or unique to this program. Agents had to complete other responsibilities such as “canning season, [the] county fair, and other programming” before they had time to focus on the relationship education programs. Many agents split their responsibilities between FCS and 4-H programming. For some, this meant focusing more on 4-H programming during the summer, then focusing on FCS programs during the rest of the year.

Time is my biggest barrier. I have so many varied responsibilities that this second week of October is really the first week I’ve had time to sit down and squarely focus on the Marriage Grant. My next responsibility will be to complete the [domestic violence] training (and have my assistant do so as well). I am trying to be organized and make sure I work on something with the marriage grant each week; it’s been challenging so far, but I plan to make it a regular habit.

Other agents’ time barriers included completing the required domestic violence training, creating a blog, and “time to plan, teach, and prepare food and all.” For one agent, “time is always a factor, especially having enough ‘lead time’ to promote an event.” Working with collaborative partners was also time-consuming for two of the
agents. Because this is a collaborative partner issue, it will be listed under the collaborative partner subtheme. For another agent, finding Native American speakers was “painstakingly time-consuming” and caused delays in being able to offer classes. By the time this agent was able to offer classes, they were not able to complete as many sessions as they would have liked due to time constraints.

**Collaborations.** Despite the aforementioned benefits of partnerships, five of the agents talked about challenges that arose when collaborative partners became involved. These challenges included time and effort spent coordinating with and scheduling events around collaborative partners, changes in staff of partnering organizations, and challenges in obtaining support from these partners.

Agents felt that “a tremendous amount of time and effort” was spent “networking and brainstorming” with collaborative partners. One agent noted “when working with a large coalition, sometimes it is hard to compromise. We often spend quite a bit of time debating about things.” Challenges while debating ideas involved “[being] appropriate and within the guidelines of the ‘Marriage Grant’ and still maintain[ing] the integrity and value of the local support and ‘buy-in’ effect.” Some local leaders wanted to include events that were not covered under grant guidelines. When this happened they had to find a way to cover the costs.

Involving relatively more people and organizations in the planning process also multiplied the amount of scheduling conflicts that could arise. One series of classes “was changed three times due to mandatory State surveys, holiday commitments for the youth, [and] convenience for guest speakers” and other series of classes were also cut short because of scheduling.
In spite of original success in building a partnership, an agent had problems because a staff member who had been on board with the program left her position. The original plan was for the agent to provide materials but not teach the class. This agent shared, “The [county] Housing Authority did not participate in the program. It was planned under a previous coordinator who left their employment and the new staff did not actively buy into the program.”

Other challenges included trying to find other opportunities after programs were cancelled, locating community partners that could instruct activities, finding locations to hold classes, getting publicity for the programs, and obtaining collaborative partner’s support for programs.

In spite of the new challenges that arose with working with collaborative partners, agents felt that this time and effort would “hopefully pay off in the long run.” This is because “Local buy-in to the ‘marriage/relationship’ project is extremely critical for successful programming at the community level.”

**Cultural resources.** The four counties that served non-English-speaking populations described challenges in obtaining appropriate curriculum or instructors who speak the language. Three of the counties served Spanish-speaking populations, and one county served a Native American population. The agents indicated that finding qualified speakers who spoke the native language and who were trusted within their communities was critical to the success of their programs. Agents struggled at first to find speakers until they visited with people from that culture’s community to find people whom they recommended. Agents also had scheduled speakers or interpreters fall through, as one agent shared: “We…had a guest speaker cancel on us at the last minute.” However, a
“fabulous Spanish-speaking intern quickly stepped up and taught the class with less than a 24-hour notice.” However, not all of the agents were able to have staff members step in when speakers or interpreters fell through, which affected the quality, and delivery of the programs to culturally diverse audiences, which in turn affected the attendance of non-English speaking participants.

Finding materials in a different language was also difficult. One agent had been asked to present materials in Spanish many times but could not find prepared materials. This person finally “put a presentation together that worked very well for both audiences.” Another barrier was the effort and time that it took to meet participant needs. The Latino community typically would rather attend an event with their whole family than as a couple (Skogrand & Shirer, 2007). Some extension professionals have found that in order get Latino participants to attend, they must provide free dinner and childcare along with the classes. An agent who provided these incentives said, “This series is literally very exhausting. For the next series, we have cut it down to three workshops rather than four. We hope that it won’t affect the quality just because we have cut down on the quantity.”

**Other resources.** Because extension agents typically provide programming designed to reach all audiences, they generally provide low-cost programs. Agents are used to creating quality programs while making the most of their budget. They are often required to secure extra funding by writing grants to obtain outside funding sources. Despite funding provided by the grant, for four of the agents, challenges involved money. Some of the agents offered classes about marriage and money, in which afterward, individuals could enroll in a state match program that would match money that the
participants saved over three years that could later be used toward a house or education. However, one agent could only hold two classes instead of four because state match money for IDA participants was “so scarce.” Another agent struggled with money because a catering company increased prices after the grant budget was written, and another agent had difficulty finding an affordable location to hold classes: “In [our county] there just aren’t any affordable venues that will fit more than 100 people, so for our Valentine’s event we haven’t been able to grow like we would like in numbers.” Another agent shared a learning experience about working with a budget:

I think my biggest barrier has been realizing that the money only goes so far…I have planned a specific budget and am working hard to keep within that budget – but some of the activities and experiences I have planned seem to be more than I had anticipated. I try to economize where I can and am conscious of overspending, but I also don’t want to under-spend. Managing this budget has been a good learning experience for me and I am excited for the future.

For four of the agents, another barrier was finding adequate staff to provide services for the programs. Agents struggled to find adequate childcare for their programs. In another case, the staff hired to be in charge of the relationship education programs moved, so other staff had to be found. The agent whose coalition voted for a blog had to find staff to maintain this blog, which would require money to pay that staff member as well. Although it was challenging to find adequate staff to fulfill the extra responsibilities that came with the implementation of this project, some of the agents were able to rely on staff within their office to fill in. For example:
The individual that was hired to help with events and classes has not been able to work as many hours as anticipated due to the demands of her full-time job. Luckily I have had three interns and another volunteer from the community to assist and I have provided honorariums that I would have paid to my other hired help as an appreciation for others that have assisted.

For two agents there were frustrations with purchasing. One had frustrations with procurement credit cards used for purchasing program supplies. An agent in a rural county reported that educators had the burden of traveling long distances to make program purchases, which was time consuming for them and also costly for the program to reimburse mileage.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Overview

Using phenomenological theory to analyze and describe the “essence” of the experiences of FCS agents, this study explored processes of providing couple and relationship education in community settings. Although previous literature has addressed the role of Extension in implementing CRE (e.g., Goddard & Olsen, 2004), relatively less is known about the processes through which education is offered, especially with regard to FCS agents as facilitators. This study explored agents’ answers to two broad questions about their successes and challenges: (1) “What were the successes that FCS extension agents experienced in implementing CRE?” (2) “What were the challenges to implementation?”

In general, findings from the current study were consistent with existing literature in that successes included working with collaborative partners and having access to resources, positive outcomes of CRE, and actual attendance of programs (Futris, 2007; NHMRC, 2009). Challenges working with projects were also largely similar to previous research, in that challenges were related to limits to resources, constraints experienced by participants, and struggles with attendance (Bir, Greene, et al., 2005; Bir, Pilkauskas, et al., 2005; Carlton et al., 2009; Dion et al., 2008; Futris, 2007; Joshi et al., 2008; Ooms & Wilson, 2004). It is notable that sometimes the very factors that increased success in the programs were also factors that added to challenges and stress for the agents. This is consistent with literature that describes the successes and difficulties of working with
collaborations (Carlton et al., 2009). Moreover, findings supported ecological theory and life course theory. The Hawkins and colleagues’ (2004) framework for CRE also provides a useful framework to the findings. This section will discuss how findings inform both existing research and theory. This will be followed by implications for extension programming and further research.

**Findings Consistent with Extant Research**

The purpose of this study was to explore successes and challenges that FCS agents experienced in order to better understand the process of the implementation of CRE. The overlap of findings consistent with previous studies suggests that much of what has been studied about the implementation of CRE applies to extension agents. To the extent that these success and challenge points overlap with other facilitators of CRE, it may be that CRE is a viable fit for FCS extension agents, who already have the responsibility to understand and meet the diversity of needs within their respective communities. Findings from this study provide insight into successes and challenges faced when implementing relatively light-intensity CRE across many settings and with many collaborative partners. These findings may be helpful for other states and counties that implement CRE initiatives.

**Successes and challenges.** Although differing themes emerged about both successes and challenges of FCS agents, some topics occurred in both categories. These topics included collaborative partners, agent resources, and attendance/participation. Although the findings were analyzed separately, they may be best understood and interpreted in context of each other. The next sections will discuss these concurrently, followed by other successes and challenges which did not have parallel themes.
Collaborative partners. A frequent topic that emerged both among successes and challenges was that of partnership. The relevance of collaborative partners and recognition of the complexities of families’ lives within the larger scope of their communities highlights the salience of the ecological model. An ecological perspective focuses on complexities of environments and interactions between systems that affect individuals and families (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), and thus family life education conducted from an ecological perspective recognizes these contextual influences. The FCS agents facilitated CRE in many different settings and “systems” within individuals’ and families’ environments, and found it both important, yet, sometimes challenging to work closely with these systems in various ways. Existing research suggests that especially when working with low-income and culturally diverse audiences, professionals should team up with other agencies who already work with these audiences in order to build relationships of trust and to better meet the needs of these audiences (Ooms & Wilson, 2004). The Hawkins’ et al. (2004) framework also suggests offering CRE across multiple community settings. As mentioned previously, working with collaborative partners was a requirement specified by the grant’s RFP.

Consistent with prior literature that highlights the importance and challenges of community involvement and local buy-in (Dion et al., 2008; Futris, 2007), eleven of the agents talked about the importance of collaborative partners to their success, and five agents talked about challenges of working with collaborative partners. Collaborations helped agents to become more in tune with their audiences, brainstorming ideas, and offering suggestions of how to appeal to local communities. Much time and effort was spent debating and compromising on ideas that would help meet community needs but
still fit within grant guidelines. Other facilitators of CRE programs have described similar difficulties due to differing goals and viewpoints that are added when working with multiple partners (Carlton et al., 2009). Because working with larger programs brings added stressors, adapting to fit the needs of all the organizational partners is an ongoing challenge (Bir, Greene, et al., 2005).

It is also clear that collaborative partners and extension agents mutually benefitted each other. Collaborative partners broadened the experiences by letting participants experience CRE in new settings, such as learning about how relationships are affected through eating meals together. Likewise, Extension agents brought CRE to audiences who would not have received it without the partnership. Agents were able to teach more classes and to access individuals that they would not have been able to reach without their partnerships. Collaborative partners also provided program incentives and locations and offered mailing lists and advertisement of classes. Similarly, prior research suggests many advantages to using collaborative partners, including the relationships of trust with existing clientele, peoples’ familiarity with the educational setting, and the ability to pool community resources together to meet local needs (Futris, 2007; Ooms & Wilson, 2004; Skogrand & Shirer, 2007).

Agents seemed to have the most success with collaborative partners when their programs fit together with other extension programs or with other community events, and when goals were similar. Likewise, Dion et al. (2008) found that collaborations were more successful when there was a good fit between the goals of partnering organizations. In one instance, a staff member from a collaborative partnership left her position, and the county agent had difficulty because the new staff member did not buy into the project.
Other researchers have found that many agencies may show resistance in adapting their programs to teach concepts about healthy marriage relationships because they generally do not teach CRE (NHMRC, 2009). It is helpful when there is support from the staff of the partnering organization (Dion et al., 2008).

A common finding in this study is that collaborative partners were for the most part supportive of CRE. Partners typically became excited about the programs and were eager to support programming for people within their jurisdictions and among their clientele. They were often willing to support CRE in their community, and regarded FCS agents as reliable sources for implementing CRE.

Consistent with previous research, agents that served culturally diverse populations faced unique challenges (NHMRC, 2009). These included finding culturally appropriate instructors and curriculum, and time and effort adapting to other target audience needs. It was typically a time-consuming struggle for agents to find these resources, and some did not have success until they formed effective culturally-based partnerships. When working with culturally diverse populations, such partnerships were essential to the credibility of the programs. These partnerships also allowed for access to low-income and culturally diverse audiences due to connections with and understanding of these audiences. Moreover, it was deemed necessary to have native speakers who had the ability to connect with audiences culturally as well as linguistically. Previous studies have found that low-income and culturally diverse populations may mistrust agencies or feel that they have different values (Skogrand & Shirer, 2007). Agents followed scholars’ recommendations of using a cultural guide, teaching culturally-appropriate
curriculum (Skogrand & Shirer, 2007), and working with partnerships or coalitions that are representative of the community and the target audience (Futris, 2007).

Although partnerships were essential to success, sometimes speakers or interpreters did not follow through with their commitments. In one instance, an intern was able to step in and teach a class when a speaker cancelled last minute. In another case, an interpreter could only come to one class, and although there were volunteer interpreters, non-English speaking participants stopped coming after the first three classes. The agent suggested that they may have dropped out because of the all-English instruction, or because they felt that the teachers were just teaching based on “white people’s” values. This happened even though the curriculum was designed specifically for Native American participants.

There were other challenges in adapting to the needs of culturally diverse audiences. For example, because members of the Latino community often prefer to attend an event as a family (Skogrand & Shirer, 2007) some felt it was crucial to include incentives such as childcare and dinner, which in turn presented an extra challenge. Because the series was “literally exhausting” this agent determined that the next year classes would be cut down to three nights instead of four.

Agent resources. Agents’ access to already-established resources contributed to their success in the project. Resources included familiarity with the community and the ability to be flexible – tools that are important in offering CRE. FCS extension agents have long served people in a variety of ways, and thus have well-established networks, methods of advertisement, and programs including mailing lists, newsletters, and word-of-mouth advertisement which were all instrumental in this project. They also had access
to CRE training. As seen in these data, community members seemed to have come to trust agents and their programs. Agents are familiar with presenting workshops and classes to the community, typically know their audiences needs, and are often creative in the ways that they implement programming and involve their audiences. For example, many agents offered low-intensity activities, and demonstrated creativity in combining these with existing programs. Many agents felt that their programs achieved their purpose of strengthening relationships in some cases merely by making CRE visible in the community, and in other cases, by giving couples skills and enjoyable ways of spending time together.

Extension agents’ complexity of roles requires the ability to be flexible. This enabled them to try different methods when something didn’t work as planned. For example, when classes were changed or rescheduled, some were able to reschedule classes. Many agents also have staff members who were willing and able to step in and help with programs when needed. Past research states that program leaders must be able to be flexible (Carlton et al., 2009).

Although agent resources contributed to their success, there were also resource-related challenges. The most prevalent of these were time and money. Because agents have many responsibilities, time is bound to be a challenge in any extension programming. Previous researchers have also found that program leaders must be resilient and flexible in order to manage their roles and responsibilities (Carlton et al., 2009). Extension agents generally are able to provide low-cost programming to their audiences. Despite money that was provided by the grant, four of the agents talked about the lack of money as a barrier. Challenges included scarcity of money provided by
collaborative organizations, changing prices, and difficulty in finding affordable locations for classes. Research suggests that an ongoing challenge will be sustaining funding for ongoing projects (NHMRC, 2009). Other challenges involved staffing issues and county logistics. For example, an agent in a rural county reported that travelling long distances was a burden for instructors in that specific county. Mileage was also an ongoing challenge for rural counties.

Even though agents had access to resources that came solely from their position as extension agents, they were able to reach more people as they partnered with other organizations. Because specialists can only reach so many people, there is a need for CRE to be delivered in different ways in order to reach more participants (Hawkins et al., 2004). Alternate approaches to setting, method, and delivery of CRE, as utilized in this project, represent ways to reach broader audiences and more individuals.

**Attendance/participation.** Many findings about successes and challenges with attendance and participation were consistent with previous literature. These findings pertained to numbers of people recruited and participating and target audience participation.

**Numbers.** Although past CRE initiatives have been able to successfully recruit participants using referrals from well-established community partners, and some have been able to have many participants (Bir, Greene, et al., 2005), recruitment and retention is a pervasive challenge in CRE programming (Bir, Greene, et al., 2005; Bir, Pilkauskas, et al., 2005; Dion et al., 2008; Joshi et al., 2008). Many agents reported that they were able to recruit a moderate number of people to their classes or that they could count on an average people to attend. Some even had a higher turnout to events than they expected.
Even so, many agents talked about the “ongoing struggle” to recruit more participants. Some classes had to be cancelled or rescheduled because of low numbers, and some agents struggled to retain participants in multiple classes.

Scholars suggest that more research is needed to know why more people who would benefit from CRE do not participate (Bir, Greene, et al., 2005). Agents listed some participant barriers to involvement, including time and the perception of CRE. Some agents felt that people were interested in CRE, but busy with too many other things going on in the community. Because of this, they tried to offer classes at convenient times, as recommended by the literature (Skogrand & Shirer, 2007), but still struggled to find times that would work around other community events. Other agents felt that many people did not participate in programs because of their perception of CRE: either the programs were new and the word had not spread, or people were not sure what CRE was, or they were men who perhaps did not want to attend classes about relationships.

Researchers have noted that many people, including men, have a stigma towards CRE (Bir, Greene, et al., 2005, Halford, 2004). However, this study points out that perhaps the reason that people do not attend is because of the newness of the program and a lack of awareness. As with any new idea or program, it takes time for the macrosystem, or society norms, to be changed enough so that people will begin to support it.

The comprehensive framework proposed by Hawkins and colleagues (2004) suggested that CRE can be offered in varying intensities and durations. It was suggested that lower-intensity activities might remove some participant barriers and attract couples who may not normally attend. Lower-intensity activities may also serve as a means of prevention because they may reach participants who are not seeking out remediation for
an immediate need. Because extension agents are accountable for reaching a certain number of participants each year, it is important that they are have sufficient people attending their programs. Agents in this project mulled over ways in which they could recruit more participants, especially from target populations.

Target audience. Some agents were able to reach low-income and at-risk audiences, but – consistent with previous findings – other agents described this as their greatest challenge (Joshi et al., 2008, Ooms & Wilson, 2004). Although collaborative partners were instrumental in reaching out to target audiences, such partner support and referral to programs did not automatically mean that participants would participate in programs. Even though Hawkins et al. (2004) suggested that offering lower-intensity programs would attract more low-income audiences by reducing such barriers as time and cost, more research is needed to know why more people did not participate. Even so, some agents were able to reach at-risk audiences with much needed information that would help them in their future relationships. Agents perceived that at-risk youth that they were teaching were often confused about their relationships, and that some had low self-esteem and unrealistic expectations of relationships. They reported that at-risk youth were engaged in the classes and were interested in learning more, as evidenced by the questions that they asked. These findings support Hawkins and colleagues’ (2004) integration of life course theory into CRE. Although CRE focuses largely on young adult or adult couples, life course theory informs professionals that adolescents are in a stage of life where they may be particularly ready and eager to learn about healthy relationships (Hawkins et al., 2004). Even though adolescents may not yet be in intimate relationships,
they are forming attitudes and perceptions of marriage, and many are bombarded by confusing messages from the media about relationships.

*Perpetuation of programs.* Findings about agents’ ability to perpetuate programs support past research that suggests that implementing CRE can begin to change the culture of the community. Hawkins et al. (2004) described this as cultural seeding through what the ecological perspective calls the macrosystem. This is a system that is not directly connected to the individual but affects individuals and society as a whole through changes in social norms and attitudes (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). As previously mentioned, one challenge that agents had was people’s perception of or lack of awareness about CRE. Some agents involved in this project were hesitant to be involved because in the past they had experienced difficulty in getting people to come to programs such as PREP, and therefore, they did not think that their community would be interested in other CRE programs. Thus, rather than providing high-intensity workshops that required a high time commitment on part of the participants, many agents provided one-time or short-term CRE classes and activities that were low-cost. Additionally, with support from collaborative partners, agents were more in tune with community needs and interests, and were able to utilize this knowledge to create programs that appealed to their audiences, creating both visibility and interest.

Successful programs led to the ability to perpetuate CRE. These programs helped to create awareness about the importance of healthy relationships, and led to individuals and organizations becoming excited and spreading the word about CRE. Some counties had existing marriage coalitions, but popular speakers or programming helped to create visibility. In counties where CRE had been offered by agents for a number of years, it
was more typical for these agents to offer multiple classes or series of classes. In these counties, there seemed to be heightened community interest and demand for CRE activities and materials from Cooperative Extension. Therefore, the success of these programs led to ongoing support from individuals and the community, making it possible for agents to continue or expand CRE programming.

**Participant outcomes.** Agents felt that participants gained new relationship skills and were able to strengthen their relationships by attending the CRE activities and classes. These findings are consistent with past research, which has found CRE to be effective in increasing communication skills and relationship quality (Hawkins et al., 2008; Jakubowski et al., 2004). Agents saw couples bonding and spending time together. They also recognized that many at-risk youth who lacked relationship skills were able to recognize the difference between a healthy and an unhealthy relationship. Not only this, but they seemed to enjoy the activities! This is meaningful because participants, especially youth, are more likely to come back if they enjoyed the information and felt that it was something that could help them. Participants thanked facilitators for offering programs and participants were appreciative of program offerings such as childcare and meals. This positive feedback shows that people liked the programs and would most likely be willing to attend more classes.

**Staff outcomes.** A few of the staff reported things that they gained from programs, such as enjoyment or satisfaction with the programs in meeting community needs. When people feel successful in a task, they are more likely to repeat it (Crain, 2000). Agents who enjoyed their projects and felt that they were important are more
likely to implement future CRE activities as well as spread the word to other agents who
did not participate in the programs.

**Implications for Extension Education**

Findings about successes and challenges that FCS Extension agents experienced
in the Utah Healthy Relationship Initiative offer many important implications for
Extension Education programming.

*Implication 1: Collaborative partners were essential to achieve access to participants.* FCS agents were able to offer CRE across multiple settings, as suggested by Hawkins et al. (2004), by partnering with many existing organizations that already served a wide spectrum of audiences. Some of these settings were natural settings to offer CRE, such as government organizations or work settings. Local buy-into programs was a must. Partnerships offered support, ideas for meeting community needs, advertisement, and incentives. They also allowed for the expansion of programs by offering locations to hold classes and access to participants which they would not have been able to reach without the partnerships. However, working with collaborative partners multiplies the number of people to work with and can be challenging, time-consuming, and adds stressors to projects. Implications for extension include beginning early to establish community partnerships, allowing plenty of time for brainstorming sessions, scheduling, rescheduling, recruitment, and implementation of programs. Extension agents also need to be flexible in order to work with their partners. They may need to compromise with partners and help with the partners programs as well.

*Implication 2: Agent resources were also critical to success.* The current study suggests that extension professionals already have many things that it takes to
successfully implement CRE, including long-established programming, means of recruitment, and ability to get the word out. Many agents mentioned in-office staff members that were able to support agents when there was a problem. Implications for extension includes providing sufficient funding for staff, and hiring capable, reliable individuals that are willing to go the extra mile when needed.

**Implication 3: Cultural resources are critical to success.** All agents who served non-English populations described challenges in obtaining instructors and curriculum to fit the target audience. Agents were able to find speakers, but sometimes those whom they found were not able to keep their commitments. The incident in which non-English speaking participants left when there were volunteer interpreters suggests that it is important to provide an instructor who is fluent in the language -- at least when there is predominantly one non-English language spoken. The incident happened even though instructors were using a curriculum that was tailored specifically for Native Americans.

**Implication 4: Varying-intensity activities, methods, and delivery methods are successful ways to reach many participants and may help expand CRE via Extension programming.** Past researchers have requested “more flexible and innovative” programming (Larson, 2004, p. 423) and Hawkins and colleagues’ (2004) framework for CRE suggested that providers offer varying intensities of CRE to meet community needs. By creating light-intensity activities, agents were able to work with community partners to create activities and classes that appealed to audiences. One-time or few-time activities that were low intensity drew audiences, helped reduce some participation barriers, and created visibility and interest. Although these activities may not affect
change as much as high-intensity activities, they were instrumental in getting many people thinking about healthy relationships.

Many FCS agents also varied their methods of teaching and mode of delivery, as suggested by Hawkins and colleagues’ (2004) framework. For example, many offered flexible programs that tied CRE into existing programs. Two counties offered non-traditional CRE through date night activities such as rock climbing and dancing. Another county offered flexible programming through the marriage punch cards, in which extension agents only provided the cards and couples completed the activities on their own. While many of the FCS agents in this project taught workshops, they also recruited collaborative partners and instructors. Agents also disseminated information about healthy relationships to organizations and individuals.

Once community leaders and individuals found out about programs, they were generally interested and supportive. Agent data suggest that those who participated for the most part seemed to enjoy the CRE classes and activities. As with all programming, people may not be sure about it at first because they may not know what it is. However, when there is successful education programming the community may catch on because people can spread the word. There is a possibility for growth and perpetuation of programs, and these results suggest that cultural seeding can occur, at least on a community scale.

**Implication 5: Youth may be an optimal time to offer CRE programming.** Life course theory suggests that there are critical stages of life or reachable moments in which individuals are ready to be taught (White & Klein, 2008). These results suggest that youth were interested in learning relationship skills, and that they may be at an optimal
time to learn many important skills. Extension already understands the importance of positive adjustment in youth, and healthy CRE may fit well among the many opportunities already available through 4-H programming.

Implication 6: Agent enthusiasm is important for program growth. Agents were enthusiastic and excited about their programs. Just as community partners who were excited about programs were more willing to do more for their programs, agents who were excited about doing programs and pleased with the results of the project were more willing to do it again. Implications for extension include having agents spread the word about CRE programming through sharing their successes and how they overcame challenges with other extension agents via informal and formal sharing opportunities. Part of this is a natural process. For example, as many extension agents heard about the success of one county’s marriage punch cards, many agents mentioned that they wanted to try that in the next year’s projects.

Implication 7: Successes and challenges led to agent growth. Many of the agents in this study implemented CRE for the first time. Some of the challenges that agents faced could be due to lack of experience. Additionally, the implementation of CRE for the first time in their counties presented other challenges. The agents’ struggles and learning experiences led to growth that will benefit them in future endeavors. Not only this, but the counties benefitted by being exposed to CRE. Although it may be argued that funding should only go to those who are experienced, implications for extension include funding and mentoring inexperienced agents along with experienced agents in order to provide opportunities for growth and future success.
Implication 8: There is room for improvement. Although agents were able to reach many more participants through the use of collaborations, there was still the same struggle to try to recruit more participants, especially low-income and diverse audiences. This indicates that perhaps more research and training is needed for advertisement and recruitment strategies, including understanding the needs of diverse audiences.

Limitations

An important potential limitation to this study is the sample size. Due to the small size, and to the variability in counties and community needs, the findings may not be generalizable to all extension agents in Utah or in other states. From a phenomenological perspective, however, a relatively small sample size may be advantageous, in that the goal of phenomenology is to represent the shared essence of experience. It is possible that a large sample could result in overgeneralization of the lived experiences of people who have shared common phenomena. Another limitation to the study is the homogeneity of the sample. This study was conducted in a state which is predominantly white, and where a majority of the population claim the same religion. The agents were all white and the majority were female. In other states there may have been more diversity of agents which may have brought forth different findings.

Other limitations may be agent or researcher biases. Because the agents turned these feedback forms into the co-principal investigators that gave them grant money, they may have reported information that they felt the investigators may have wanted to hear, thus over- or under-reporting successes and challenges in the project in an effort to look good and meet the requirements of the grantors. The researcher may also have biases
based on her own experiences or her own interpretation of the data, and may have found what she expected to find.

**Implications for Further Research**

*Implication 1: Recruiting and retaining participants.* This study shows the importance of collaborations to the implementation of CRE. Agents were able to reach more participants because they partnered with agencies that allowed access to these individuals, but they still mulled over ways to reach more participants. More research is needed to identify specific mechanisms in the recruitment and retention of participants, especially low-income and culturally diverse audiences.

*Implication 2: Varied experiences.* This study was about the collective experiences in the implementation of CRE. Further research could study the differences between agents who implemented one-time projects versus those who offered multiple classes and activities, exploring for example to what extent there may be particular steps in moving from light-intensity to more moderate or high intensity programming, or even exploring particular characteristics in the facilitator that lead to success. Other questions include the differences between facilitators who seemed to struggle with recruitment and those who did not, differences in ability to serve culturally diverse audiences, and differences in community and staff resources readily available to the county agents (i.e., university setting versus non-university setting; urban versus rural settings).

**Concluding Remarks**

Agents’ successes and challenges in the UHRI were largely consistent with research about program providers in other healthy relationship initiatives. Collaborative
organizations were vital to success, but created some extra challenges for the agents. Agent resources were also instrumental in the project. Providing programming for culturally diverse audiences also created unique challenges. Although agents were pleased to be able to have participants in their programs, they had the ongoing struggle of recruiting participants. This was especially true of low-income and culturally diverse audiences. Despite these challenges, agents found that the programs created interest for individuals and collaborative partners, and sparked the continuation or expansion of CRE programming.
REFERENCES


program by religious organizations: Results of a dissemination trial. *Family Relations*, 53, 504-512.


APPENDICES
Appendix A

Instrumentation
Utah Healthy Relationship Initiative

Extension Agent Demographic Information

1. I am: □ Married □ Single □ Separated/Divorced □ Remarried □ Cohabiting

2. Race/ethnicity:
   □ Caucasian □ Hispanic/Latino □ African-American □ Middle Eastern
   □ Asian/Pacific Islander □ Native American □ Other ______________

3. If you have a religious preference, what is it?
   □ Christian–Catholic □ Protestant (Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, etc) □ Christian – LDS
   □ Christian – Non-Denominational □ Jewish □ Muslim □ Other ______

4. How many people, paid or volunteer, do you have working in your office, who provide support your implementation of this program? (ie. Clerical staff, interns, volunteers, etc.) _____ Estimate total of full time employees _____

5. How many years have you been in Extension? _____

6. What program areas do you cover?

7. What % of your time do you spend in the area of Family Relationships?

8. What percentage of clients do you primarily serve? (fill in all that apply)
   1. Urban ___%
   2. Suburban ___%
   3. Rural ___%
   4. Mixed (specify): ____________________ ___%

THANK YOU FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION
Technical Support and Feedback Form

The Utah Healthy Marriage Commission and Brian Higginbotham and Linda Skogrand, who are providing technical support, want to know how your project is going. We also want to know when Brian and Linda might be useful in providing technical support. We, therefore, ask that you complete this form and return it to Brian or Linda within 15 days after the end of each quarter.

Name of Grantee__________________________________________ Date________________

1. Briefly summarize for us what you have done this past quarter to complete the components of your grant.

2. What successes have you had?

3. What barriers have you encountered?

4. Would you like technical support? If so, what kind of help would you like?
Feedback on the Progress of Your Project

Please indicate the progress you have made for each of the activities you proposed. Indicate the activity, and projected number to be served, and the number served to date. Also, very briefly indicate where you are at in the process of completing each activity. Please use the corresponding number of the activity you used on the initial proposal.

For example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Projected # Served</th>
<th># Served to Date</th>
<th>Where Are You in the Process?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Do guest lectures in schools</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Have completed one out of five classes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Marriage awards/writing competition</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>To be completed during marriage week. However, I have talked with the principal of the middle school and she is on board. I’ve also talked with the mayor and he is excited about the photo op this will provide as he passes out the awards.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Add additional pages if needed.
Appendix B

Utah State University IRB Approval
INFORMED CONSENT
Assessing Relationship Dynamics

Professor Bradford in the Department of Family, Consumer, and Human Development at Utah State University is conducting a research study to find out more about implementation of relationship education — specifically, successes and barriers in the implementation of the relationship education, particularly in the context of setting. You have been asked to take part because you are part of the UHRI (Utah Healthy Relationship Initiative) grant as a facilitator of marriage/relationship education. The purpose of this research is to explore the following among providers of marriage/relationship education (MRE): (a) successes and challenges regarding collaboration (b) changes that you would make (c) whether or not you would take on this project again (d) whether or not you thought it was successful.

Procedures: You are being asked to provide feedback to interview questions regarding the successes and barriers that you faced in implementing education. These will be a series of follow-up questions to the quarterly reports that you already filled out. Interviews will be done face-to-face, where possible, or by telephone. Answers will be audio recorded and analyzed as part of a qualitative study. You will be asked not to reveal names of participants who are involved in the relationship education initiative.

New Findings During the course of this research study, you will be informed of any significant new findings (either good or bad), such as changes in the risks or benefits resulting from participation in the research, or new alternatives to participation that might cause you to change your mind about continuing in the study. If new information is obtained that is relevant or useful to you, or if the procedures and/or methods change at any time throughout this study, your consent to continue participating in this study will be obtained again.

Risks Participation in this research study may involve some added risks or discomforts. These may include discussing exposure to uncomfortable realities in facilitating education, such as violent relationships, as well as the potential discomfort related to assessing your knowledge of these issues.

To the best of my knowledge, participation will include no more risk of harm than you would experience otherwise. I keep all information confidential.

Benefits There may or may not be any direct benefit to you from these procedures. The investigator, however, may learn more about your experiences with the project in order to more effectively execute relationship education. Potentially, you may gain knowledge about the implementation of healthy relationship education that may help you in your future projects.

Explanation & offer to answer questions Dr. Kay Bradford has explained this research study to you and answered your questions. If you have other questions or research-related problems, you may reach him at (435) 797-5454.

Extra Cost(s) / Payment/Compensation There are no costs for participation, and no payment for participation.

Voluntary nature of participation and right to withdraw without consequence Participation in research is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without consequence or loss of benefits. You are free to continue facilitating relationship education through the grant. You are also free to seek alternative sources of relationship education knowledge and resources. You may be withdrawn from this study without your consent by the investigator if your participation is no longer appropriate (e.g., if you are not a provider of relationship education through USU Extension).
INFORMED CONSENT
Assessing Relationship Dynamics

Confidentiality Research records will be kept confidential, consistent with federal and state regulations. Only the investigator (Dr. Bradford), his research assistant (Stacey Huffaker), and the co-investigators (Drs. Linda Skogrand and Brian Higginbotham) will have access to the data which will be kept in a locked file cabinet in his locked office. If I write about the results or share it with other researchers, I will write about the combined information, and always keep identifying information confidential. Names of counties may be mentioned specifically. The audio recordings will be destroyed within two years after the interviews.

IRB Approval Statement The Institutional Review Board for the protection of human participants at USU has approved this research study. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights or a research-related injury, you may contact the IRB Administrator at (435) 797-0567 or email irb@usu.edu. If you have a concern or complaint about the research and you would like to contact someone other than the research team, you may contact the IRB Administrator to obtain information or to offer input.

Copy of consent You have been given two copies of this Informed Consent. Please sign both copies and retain one copy for your files.

Investigator Statement “I certify that the research study has been explained to the individual, by me or my research staff, and that the individual understands the nature and purpose, the possible risks and benefits associated with taking part in this research study. Any questions that have been raised have been answered.”

Signature of PI: Kay Bradford, PhD, LMFT

Signature of CI: Linda Skogrand, PhD, Family Life Extension Specialist

Signature of RA: Stacey Huffaker, M.S. Student

Signature of Participant By signing below, I agree to participate.

Participant’s signature  Date
Appendix C

County Demographics
Table 1

*County Demographics**

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Population estimate</th>
<th>% White, Non-Hispanic</th>
<th>% Hispanic Latino origin</th>
<th>Median household income ($)</th>
<th>% Poverty level</th>
<th>Agent role</th>
<th>Staff assistant</th>
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<td>45,994</td>
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<td>FCS/4-H</td>
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<td>85.5</td>
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<td>45,621</td>
<td>13.3</td>
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* In this case, Navajo, rather than Latino.
** U.S. Census Bureau (2010).
***Investigators include other members on staff.
CD = County Director