FRAMING research

PROJECT Brief

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Fostering Trust with Program Participants and Serving LGBTQ+ Youth: Highlights from the Third FRAMING Research Technical Work Group on Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education

Healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) programs aim to promote strong, healthy families by teaching skills to help young people and adults form and maintain high quality romantic relationships (Office of Family Assistance 2021). Since 2006, Congress has dedicated substantial funding to HMRE programming through competitive, multiyear grants administered by the Office of Family Assistance (OFA) in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) (U.S. Congress 2010; ACF 2020a; ACF 2020b). OFA also partners with the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) in ACF to build the evidence base to strengthen programming (OFA 2021). Beginning in 2018, ACF undertook the Fatherhood, Relationships, and Marriage—Illuminating the Next Generation of Research (FRAMING Research) project to systematically identify gaps in the knowledge base for HMRE programming and responsible fatherhood (RF) programming (OPRE n.d.).

The current phase of the FRAMING Research project focuses on addressing two distinct challenges that HMRE programs commonly face. The first challenge is building trust with program participants and reducing skepticism of HMRE services. Many of the individuals and couples who could benefit from relationship education services express feelings of mistrust, not just in their romantic relationships but also toward social services and government systems (Dion et al. 2010; Zaveri and Baumgartner 2016). If HMRE programs cannot successfully recruit and engage participants because of mistrust, then the programs are unlikely to have their intended effects.

About the FRAMING Research project

This work is part of the FRAMING Research project, sponsored by the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The Administration for Children and Families has partnered with Mathematica and its subcontractor Public Strategies to conduct the FRAMING Research project. The project team collects and synthesizes information by conducting literature reviews, knowledge mapping, expert consultations, and a series of technical work groups focused on healthy marriage and relationship education or responsible fatherhood programming. The project team is also drafting a series of white papers to explore key topics that emerge during the project related to healthy marriage and relationship education programming and responsible fatherhood programming.

A second challenge for HMRE programs is making programming more inclusive for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning (LGBTQ+) populations (Peters et al. 2018). This challenge is particularly salient for HMRE programs that serve youth. The number of young people who identify as LGBTQ+ has increased in recent years (Rapoport et al. 2021). As a result, programs could use additional guidance on the relationship issues and experiences that LGBTQ+ youth face and on how to address these topics in an inclusive way in their classes.

To further explore these two common challenges, ACF convened a technical work group (TWG) as part of the FRAMING Research project. This TWG was the third in a series convened by the project to discuss issues related to research on HMRE programming. In this brief, we describe the meeting of the TWG and highlight key themes and research priorities identified by the group.

THE THIRD FRAMING RESEARCH HMRE TECHNICAL WORK GROUP

The third HMRE TWG for the FRAMING Research project met in July 2022. The five and a half hour meeting occurred remotely via videoconference. The group included eight individuals, including both researchers and practitioners, with expertise in delivering HMRE programs to youth and adults, conducting research on HMRE programs, and serving youth who identify as LGBTQ+ (Figure 1). ACF convened the group to gather input on future research related to fostering trust among HMRE program participants and making HMRE programming more inclusive for LGBTQ+ youth. These topics emerged from the project team's review of the relevant literature, discussions with experts in the field, and discussions with ACF about agency priorities. This brief highlights key points from the meeting; it does not cover all comments made by members of the group.

FOSTERING TRUST AMONG HMRE PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS

Building trust with program participants can positively influence their receptiveness to services and their interactions with staff and other participants. However, feelings of mistrust are common among the individuals and couples that HMRE programs serve. These feelings of mistrust can stem from several factors, including historical events or practices, experiences in one's family of origin, experiences in past relationships, and more (Benito-Gomez and Flores Rojas 2020; Sotero 2006). Issues of mistrust influencing couples' romantic and parenting relationships are a recurring theme in past ACF-sponsored studies of HMRE programs (Dion et al., 2010; Zaveri and Baumgartner 2016). Additionally, mistrust can be directed toward organizations, institutions, or those perceived as "others" or "outsiders" (Sotero 2006). These feelings of mistrust toward social institutions and organizations can affect people's willingness to seek help through community services and supports and can make it challenging for HMRE programs to recruit and engage people in services (D'Angelo and Bodenlos 2020; Friend et al. 2020).

The first part of the TWG discussion focused on strategies for building trust among HMRE programs, program participants, and the broader community. TWG members noted the following during this part of the discussion:

- Having former program participants represent and speak on behalf of the HMRE program can be effective for building trust with potential participants. For example, some HMRE programs employ former participants as program ambassadors to conduct outreach with community

members and other organizations. HMRE programs also frequently hire former participants as facilitators to lead HMRE workshops. Hearing about the program's benefits from someone who might have dealt with similar issues can alleviate skepticism among potential participants and help them understand how the program will address their interests and needs.

- Feeling connected to facilitators because of a shared identity or background is important for building trust. This connection can help build rapport and reduce skepticism among participants, which in turn can increase participants' engagement in program activities. If key program staff, such as facilitators, do not share a background with program participants, it can be helpful to hire co-facilitators who share participants' background. For example, if an HMRE program serves a lot of men, but all the facilitators are women, the program might want to hire men to serve as co-facilitators. Although the lead facilitator could still deliver most of the program content, the co-facilitator might be in a better position to answer participants' questions and provide examples that resonate with participants' identity or background.

- Strong facilitation skills are critical for building trust with participants. Facilitators should model respectful communication with participants, such as using appropriate, nonjudgmental language. Facilitators should also show empathy when participants share personal histories. Establishing procedures that prioritize participants' needs is also important for building trust. For example, programs could make sure they respond to participants' questions quickly and use a "warm handoff" procedure when staff leave the organization to share information about participants' prior engagement with the program.

- Facilitators should explain the evidence behind program content and its applicability to various types of romantic relationships. New participants might be skeptical that an HMRE program will address their needs and teach skills they can apply to their relationships. This might be particularly true for participants in same-sex relationships or more casual dating relationships, who might assume that the primary goal of HMRE programs is to promote marriage. To alleviate this skepticism, facilitators should be prepared to directly address participants' misconceptions about the program and highlight how program content applies to a wide variety of romantic relationships. Facilitators should also communicate the evidence behind information presented in class. Knowing that certain skills and strategies have been shown to work in relationships like theirs can build participants' trust in the program.

- Forming partnerships with respected organizations in the community can strengthen HMRE programs' reputation among potential participants. Participants might be more likely to trust an HMRE program if they are referred by another organization they think highly of. Working closely with other organizations in the community can also improve HMRE programs' understanding of how to meet the needs of their service population, which can foster trust. However, establishing partnerships with other community organizations can be challenging. HMRE programs should take care to ensure that the values and mission of potential partner organizations align with those of the HMRE program, and that potential partners have a positive reputation in the community.

MAKING HMRE PROGRAMS MORE INCLUSIVE FOR LGBTQ+ YOUTH

A growing number of youth and young adults identify as LGBTQ+. Between 2015 and 2019, the percentage of high school students who identified as non-heterosexual rose from 8.3 percent to 11.7 percent, an increase of more than 40 percent (Rapoport et al. 2021). In addition, data from 2017 and 2019 estimate that 1.4% of youth ages 13-17 identify as transgender (Herman et al., 2022). LGBTQ+ youth are at higher risk than other youth for unfavorable relationship and sexual experiences, including dating violence (Dank et al. 2014). They also experience higher levels of disapproval from family members, which is associated with increased strain on relationships (Reczek 2016). These greater risks suggest LGBTQ+ youth could particularly benefit from supportive HMRE services.

The second part of the TWG discussion focused on the barriers to serving LGBTQ+ youth in HMRE programs and strategies for making programs more inclusive for this population. TWG members noted the following during this part of the discussion:

- HMRE providers should consider whether to offer tailored programs specifically for LGBTQ+ youth or to include more information for LGBTQ+ youth in programs that serve a general population. Adapting programs for a general population so the programs include more information for LGBTQ+ youth allow youth to receive relevant information without having to disclose their sexuality or gender identity. In addition, offering inclusive programming for all youth can help dispel negative stereotypes and educate heterosexual, cisgender youth about how to be a good ally to their LGBTQ+ peers. In contrast, offering programming tailored to an LGBTQ+ audience might create a safer space for LGBTQ+ youth to ask questions and receive information that is more relevant to their experiences. Even when programs serve a general population of youth, such as in a school setting, programs could consider offering supplemental programming and resources for LGBTQ+ youth who might want them.

- Program facilitators might need specialized training to better serve LGBTQ+ youth. Such a training could address several topics. First, it could define commonly used terms for various LGBTQ+ identities so facilitators feel more confident speaking to an audience of LGBTQ+ youth. Second, it could help facilitators understand common relationship issues that LGBTQ+ youth face, so they are better prepared to answer questions and respond to personal experiences that youth share in the classroom. Third, a training could teach facilitators how to display cultural humility and react positively to feedback and corrections from LGBTQ+ youth in their classes. Fourth, facilitators could receive training in effective classroom management techniques to help youth navigate challenging issues and conversations and correct any discriminatory behavior directed toward LGBTQ+ youth.

- The state and local policy context can pose barriers to making HMRE programming more inclusive for LGBTQ+ youth. For HMRE programs offered in schools, program leaders and facilitators might need to be aware of school-, district-, and state-level policies or mandates that specify what content related to sexual orientation and gender identity can be delivered in the classroom. For instance, some states require proof of parental consent before discussing these topics with students. Rather than broaching the topics of sexual orientation and gender identity directly, some HMRE programs might choose to discuss relationship topics that are relevant regardless of youths' sexual orientation or gender identity, such as managing stress, communication skills, and being a supportive partner. Programs should address these topics in ways that are inclusive of the experiences and needs of LGBTQ+ youth.

FUTURE HMRE RESEARCH PRIORITIES

The TWG meeting included a brainstorming session about priority research questions and evaluation ideas related to fostering trust and making HMRE programming more inclusive for LGBTQ+ youth. The TWG members worked in two small groups to develop their ideas and then shared them with the full group to develop a set of priorities. The following four priorities emerged from this discussion:

Identify common reasons for mistrust of HMRE programs

TWG members recommended collecting data to understand common reasons why the populations that HMRE programs serve might be mistrustful or skeptical of HMRE services. Using literature reviews, focus groups, interviews, and surveys, researchers could identify common reasons why program participants or potential participants might not trust program providers or the services they offer. Research could also involve speaking with participants who have ended their participation in HMRE programs early, or people who were recruited for programs but did not participate, to understand why they chose not to participate and their perceptions of program shortcomings. After collecting these data, researchers could use statistical analysis to identify factors associated with lower rates of program uptake or higher rates of program withdrawal.

Develop and test a conceptual model of the factors that foster trust in HMRE programs

HMRE program providers and evaluators should work together to develop a conceptual model of the types of program factors that can foster trust among HMRE program participants. Potential factors could include the alignment between the curriculum and what participants want from a program, the alignment between staff's background and the background of participants, and staff training. The conceptual model should also account for various beliefs about what constitutes a trusting relationship and the types of behaviors that engender trust. Researchers could use literature reviews and qualitative data collection to identify potential factors that can help build trust between HMRE programs and participants, and to identify how various participants view trust. Researchers could then test whether the factors identified in the conceptual model enhance participants' trust in HMRE programs.

Collect data on participants' sexual orientation and gender identity to better understand the relationships and program experiences of LGBTQ+ youth

HMRE programs for youth should consider updating the demographic information they collect from participants to better understand how LGBTQ+ youth are faring in their programs. Without collecting data on participants' sexual orientation and gender identity, HMRE programs will have difficulty assessing LGBTQ+ youth's satisfaction with HMRE programming and whether they appear to be benefiting from "the services offered.[1] Collecting these data would also enable HMRE programs to explore whether LGBTQ+ youth tend to have different relationship experiences or outcomes compared with heterosexual, cisgender youth. In addition, programs could use these data to better understand the experiences of participants with intersecting identities, such as LGBTQ+ youth of color. Having a stronger understanding of the unique experiences and developmental progressions of LGBTQ+ youth could make programs more relevant for LGBTQ+ youth and enable researchers to select more relevant outcomes in future evaluations of HMRE programs.
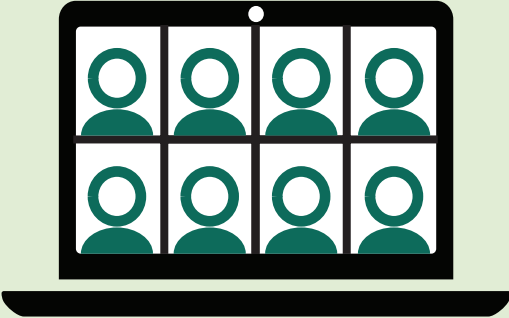
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[1] Researchers collecting data on youth's sexual orientation and gender identity should consider best practices to protect participant privacy and reduce concerns about youth discomfort with disclosure (DeChants et al. 2021). Many population-based surveys and studies, including school-based surveys of youth, have successfully collected these data without posing an additional risk to LGBTQ+ youth (Meyer et al. 2021).

Evaluate facilitator training approaches that are intended to increase LGBTQ+ inclusivity

TWG members highlighted the importance of identifying and testing facilitation strategies that might improve LGBTQ+ inclusivity among facilitators and participants. For example, to enhance cultural humility, facilitators might need more information about the LGBTQ+ community and the various identities in that community, as well as strategies to identify and correct implicit biases toward LGBTQ+ people and communities. Facilitators could also receive training on classroom management strategies, including de-escalation; correcting discriminatory behavior among students; and building support, solidarity, and community among students of all sexualities and genders. To identify promising facilitator training approaches designed to promote inclusivity, program staff and researchers could turn to related fields, such as education and mental health. Program staff and researchers could work together to adapt the approaches to the HMRE context, and to pilot and evaluate the approaches in HMRE programs for youth.

Figure 1. FRAMING Research HMRE technical work group members

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Additional FRAMING Research technical work group meetings

In July 2022, the FRAMING Research project convened another TWG meeting focused on building trust with RF program participants and serving young fathers in RF programs. A separate brief summarizes the themes from that meeting (Hennigar and Alamillo 2023). The FRAMING Research project also hosted HMRE and RF TWG meetings in 2019 and 2020. Four additional briefs summarize the themes from those meetings (Alamillo and Ouellette 2021a; Alamillo and Ouellette 2021b; Avellar et al. 2020; Wood 2020).

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