

Appalachian Marriage

Project:

Understanding Factors and Characteristics of
Strong Marriages in the Region

Principle Investigators

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I. Project Description

The Appalachian culture has a long and rich heritage. Tracing its roots to the vibrant experiences from Scottish and Irish immigrants, the regional culture embodies a set of community- and family-oriented values and beliefs that has retained much of its vitality over the centuries (Keefe, 2005). While the cultural vibrancy of the region has attracted much scholarly interest, most of the research has been limited to the intersections of political, economic, social and cultural phenomena (Lefler, 2005), while at the same time studies of the past decades have especially explored how families experience strains such as poverty, economic depression, unemployment and drug use (Blakeney, 2005) while paying little or no attention to social or psychological factors within families that can contribute to emotional resiliency and familial well-being (Fincham, 1981). Building insights on past research in comparable sub-populations the proposed research

aims to better understand how individuals in the Appalachian region describe the factors and characteristics of strong marriages.

The existing body of literature on family dynamics within Appalachian culture has made major inroads into our understanding of family strains. Studies have consistently shown that poverty and unemployment can produce stressors that - under certain circumstances - can be exacerbated by traditional gender role expectations. Frustrations derived from experiences on the job or in school often cannot be expressed outwardly and directly, either because the source of the frustration is diffused and undefined, or because there is no avenue or mechanism for redress (Bryant 1981). Economic struggles and financial uncertainty also add to an increase of an individual's stress levels and thus can contribute to more arguments for couples (Keefe, 1995). Stressors can be particularly strong when couples or families are forced to live in conditions of poverty. Under these taxing circumstances traditional gender roles can have a negative impact on family and marital dynamics because men tend to experience poverty as a threat to their own masculinity (Fincham, 1981); unable to provide for their families and lacking adequate access to compensatory identities outside the community, many men either project their emotional problems onto their significant others or - worse - channel their negative experiences into more aggressive or destructive impulses (Keefe, 2005). The effects of economic hardship, however, are not limited to psycho-social or cultural dynamics. Frequently households of nuclear families morph into extended families because children who have children themselves are forced to live with their parents. These internal changes can profoundly hinder family interactions, further strain limited financial resources and thus amplify interpersonal tensions (Keefe, Reck, and Reck 1985).

While this research offers crucial insights into the nature of strains that Appalachian families experience, it provides only limited insights into how they cope with these challenges. To develop a more balanced theoretical framework, it is necessary to also focus on factors that can help counteract those tensions. Hints as to what factors may be crucial for such an understanding primarily come from the extensive and well-established body of literature on marital satisfaction in dominant culture as well as other sub-cultures (Hatch, 2008; *Skogrand, Hatch & Singh, 2005*), and this research indicates that healthy marriages can inoculate individuals, couples as well as groups against a wide range of social, economic and psychological threats. Married men and women, for example, are substantially less likely than singles to suffer from long-term chronic illnesses or

disabilities (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Married individuals also have been shown to have much higher overall well-being than singles (Marks and Lambert 1998) and a more effective way to adapt to the vagaries of life (Hatch, 2008). While the majority of theoretical frameworks tend to put forth a universal model of what constitutes a "healthy marriage" (Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000), research on subcultures or minorities has pointed toward the existence of much plasticity in the meanings that couples attach to this time-honored social institution (*Skogrand, Hatch & Singh, 2005*).

Since very little is known as to what constitutes a "strong" or "healthy" marriage in the Appalachian region, the proposed research will not only address some of the shortcomings in the literature but also - in a more indirect fashion - try to help preserve an important element of the local Appalachian culture. Using a mixed-method approach, the research aims to blend the elegance of qualitative interview techniques with the strength of a quantitative survey methodology in order to explore the meaning and the factors associated with "strong marriages" in the region. In collaboration with our community partners (see project outcomes below) 25-30 couples will be recruited and interviewed for the research project. These couples will be chosen based on three specific criteria: 1) they need to be identified by community members as having a "strong marriage," 2) they must be able to trace their ancestry back to the late 1800s, and 3) they must currently reside in the Appalachian region. In addition, to the interviews couples will be asked to complete a marital satisfaction survey which is designed to provide an objective comparison to previous literature of marriage satisfaction in the dominant culture. The ultimate goal of this project is to understand whether the benefits and factors that create strong marriages in this region can also produce similar protective outcomes as observed in the dominant culture. Hence, the research will be guided by three interconnected research questions:

1. What does a strong marriage mean to people in the Appalachian region?
2. What factors strengthen and or weaken Appalachian marriages?
3. What differences and similarities exist between strong marriages in dominant culture and strong marriages in Appalachian culture?

II. Significance of the Proposed Work

In addition to supplementing previous literature and promoting a renewed scholarly interest in an understudied population such as the Appalachian region, this research has important practical implications

for national, regional, and local levels. At the national level a great deal of importance is placed on understanding and developing cultural awareness of the various subcultures in our society, and this awareness allows for greater tolerance and appreciation of the dynamics as well as the sustainability of the heritage of a given culture. However, given the paucity of the existing literature on the positive aspects of marriage in Appalachia, the current research provides an important contemporary supplement of the elements of strong marriages.

At the regional level, since most of the Appalachian research of the past has focused on unfortunate consequences of the poverty model rather than the enduring practices that constitute the unique rural culture, the current research will also provide an important link to the past for members of the community. At this time, the oral history of families and marriages in the cultural sense has not been sufficiently or respectfully researched, so by collecting these stories, we will provide a platform for the advocacy of tradition. These stories can serve as a powerful tool for generations that have or are growing up in the globalized, media-driven world, and may allow them the opportunity to develop cultural pride for Appalachian marriage and family. Finally, while traditional psychotherapy training emphasizes the importance of understanding the nuance of cultural diversity, at a practical level, the constraints of time in graduate school limit the depth of understanding a therapist could obtain of any given ethnic minority or subculture of the U.S. population. This often leads to cultural encapsulation or the tendency of a therapist to impose their own worldviews onto a client. Cultural encapsulation tends to lead the therapist to neglect or misinterpret the subtlety of the client's culture and is an important and potentially debilitating challenge for the long-term success of the client. Thus, at a local level, our research will provide therapists a foundation from which they can build a greater understanding and appreciation for the culturally-specific meaning of healthy marriages.

III. Goals and Expected Products: In bulleted format are the projected project outcomes for the first and second halves of the funding periods.

First Half of the Funding Period: The research will gain a greater understanding of how strong marriages in Appalachian culture can be sustained.

- Students will continue to meet with our community partners who include: The Appalachian Studies Center, two local churches in Dhlonega, an elementary school in Pickens county, and those individuals volunteering at the Vickery House. Our community

partners have begun to help us identify potential married participants for the study.

- Students will continue their training of basic interviewing skills including appropriate rapport building and probing techniques.
- Students will conduct interviews with 25-30 couples
- The research will aim to establish a stronger bridge between the local Appalachian community and NGCSU.

Second half of the funding period:

- Present a poster at the SEPA Conference in New Orleans regarding marriage in Appalachia (Intent-to submitted).
- Create a brochure and workshop presentation that summarizes the theoretical and practical aspects of the research for the community
- Write a scholarly paper on results of the research and publish in a peer-reviewed journal.
- Assist the mental health services in the Appalachian region through the dissemination of study results.

I. Plan for Involvement of Undergraduates in the Project or Activity

To date, seven student researchers have been involved in the Appalachian Marriage Project (Angel Jones, Karly King, Thomas Smith, Ryan Shepard, Brittany O'Bryant, Claude McCurry, and Dakota Fidram). These students have participated in development of the IRB application (submitted summer, 2011), the development of the qualitative "strong marriage" questionnaire and helped compile an initial list of potential research candidates. In addition, some of these students have begun their training in preparation for conducting the individual interviews of select participants. In the first half of the funding period students will be conducting all interviews. Further, all students will participate in the analysis of the interviews and in teams of two will develop independent research questions based on the themes that emerge from the interviews. Finally, students will be responsible for creating and presenting their research at a regional conference. At this point we have already submitted an intent-to-submit for the South-Eastern Psychological Association conference in New Orleans, LA. We plan on submitting another undergraduate poster presentation at the Georgia Sociological Association sometime next year. Finally, students will also help develop a community brochure

about the research and participate in the community workshops which among other places will be conducted at local churches.

V. Budget and Project Timeline

2 Apple iPad 2's with Wi-Fi + 3G
.....**\$1258.00**

The iPad's will be used primarily to aid in transcription of the interview from a digital audio file to a Microsoft word format. Utilizing the "Dragon Dictation" App greatly decreases the transcription time. In addition, the iPads will allow us to utilize online questionnaires in the field for the purpose of a higher response rate in the participants as well as being more environmentally friendly (in eliminating paper questionnaires). Finally, the 3G application will facilitate the uploading of the electronic file containing the interviews' protocols immediately following the field interview. This also minimizes error sources that frequently arise in field research.

25-30 Gift Certificates to Walmart for \$30 each
.....**\$900.00**

Given the lengthy nature of the interviews (2-3 hours) it is standard practice in the social sciences to compensate interviewee's for their time and efforts.

Gas money for interviews
.....**\$100.00**

Since some of the research participants live in rural areas (e.g. Pickens and Cherokee counties) student researchers may have to travel significant distances.

1 copy of NVivo (1 year license).....**\$199.00**

Total \$2457.00