

REFRAME:
Centering the Strength
of Black Voices in
Healthy Marriage and
Responsible
Fatherhood Programs

OPRE REPORT #

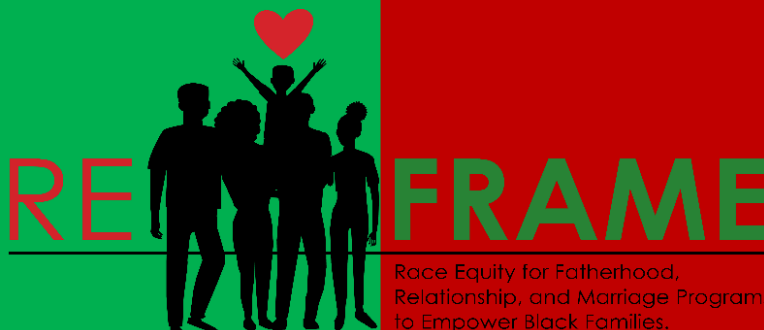
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Race Equity for Fatherhood,
Relationship, and Marriage Programs
to Empower Black Families.

Centering the Strength of Black Voices in Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Programs

Introduction

Since 2006, the Administration for Children and Families' (ACF) Office of Family Assistance (OFA) has provided Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood (HMRF) grants to fund local programs serving families through a variety of approaches, including case management, educational workshops, peer support groups, and employment assistance. Black fathers and families make up a large proportion of HMRF service populations relative to their proportional representation in the country.¹ Despite the large representation, HMRF programming models used with Black individuals and couples may not all sufficiently convey and build on the strengths and resilience of Black families. HMRF programs may need support so that staff can consistently provide families with a compassionate, solutions-based space and to ensure services are equitable and reflective of the needs of Black families. Moreover, equity-focused organizations are calling for research that will inform how to improve and adapt programming to capitalize on the unique assets and strengths of Black families. ACF is making equity a priority in its mission to support the economic and social well-being of children, individuals, families, and communities.²

What is the REFRAME project?

Race Equity for Fatherhood, Relationship, and Marriage Programs to Empower Black Families (REFRAME) is a project that directly applies this equity lens to human services provided by HMRF programs. REFRAME is a four-year project that aims to identify and document the assets, needs, and experiences of Black families served by HMRF programs and develop programmatic resources for HMRF grantees to better support Black families. MEF Associates and Insight Policy Research are leading this work through a contract administered by ACF's Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation and funded by OFA. This brief outlines the project's goal and objectives in promoting equity, introduces the Expert Workgroup formed by the project, and discusses how the study team strives to uphold the principles of equity.³

¹ In the third cohort of HMRF grantees (funded 2015-2020) Black men made up 40 percent of community fathers and 19 percent of reentering fathers in Responsible Fatherhood programs, and Black clients made up approximately 21 to 24 percent of adults and 18 percent of youth in Healthy Marriage programs. See <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/2015-cohort-healthy-marriage-and-responsible-fatherhood-grantees-interim-report-grantee>.

² The Administration for Children & Families' strategic plan includes equity as an overarching strategic goal. See <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/about/acf-strategic-plan-2022>. See ACF's position on racial equity at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/equity>.

³ We use the principles of equity described in Kristine Andrews, Jenita Parekh, and Shantai Peckoo, "A Guide to Incorporating a Racial and Ethnic Equity Perspective Throughout the Research Process," (Child Trends, 2019).

REFRAME activities

REFRAME aims to deepen our understanding of the assets, needs, and experiences of Black families to inform the field and build practice resources that promote equitable service delivery among HMRF programs. To achieve this aim, the project will:

- Engage with HMRF grantees, community members, and other experts in authentic conversations to identify the strengths and needs of Black families participating in HMRF programs. This engagement will occur through regular meetings with an Expert Workgroup and a series of grantee focus groups and listening sessions.
- Summarize and critically analyze existing literature based on expert discussions to identify and highlight strengths-based narratives and resiliencies of Black families and communities.⁴
- Develop practice resources and a framework to guide HMRF programs in meaningful and sustained work to make services more equitable, relevant, and supportive for Black individuals and couples.

What is the Expert Workgroup (EWG)?

The project prioritizes the application of a strengths-based perspective with a culturally responsive lens to elevate significant and relevant areas of consideration for future HMRF research and practice. To accomplish this, the study team assembled an Expert Workgroup (EWG) consisting of a diverse group of researchers, practitioners, and Black community members who received services from HMRF programs or other community-based organizations. The study team invited individuals with expertise on fatherhood and healthy relationships in Black communities and on Black youth. The study team selected researchers at various stages of their careers and from universities across the country. Practitioners in the work group were individuals with experience running programs in different geographical locations, including federally funded HMRF programs. Black community members included individuals with lived expertise that recently participated in HMRF grantee programs or members of other community-based organizations providing services in Black communities. The key roles of the EWG are to:

The Expert Workgroup plays a crucial role in holding the REFRAME project accountable to applying equity principles, and is a resource of knowledge contributing to development of the project's approach, its interpretation of findings, and its identification of research priorities and resources that strengthen the lives of Black families, youth, mothers, fathers, and individuals.

1. ***Assure ongoing accountability to equity principles.*** The EWG members and the study team hold each other accountable to applying equity principles in developing and carrying

<https://www.childtrends.org/publications/a-guide-to-incorporating-a-racial-and-ethnic-equity-perspective-throughout-the-research-process>.

⁴ Mentions of strengths-based practices or methods throughout this brief refer to the centering of strengths, resources, and abilities of individuals and communities rather than their deficits and pathologies. Centering someone's strengths allows the individual or community to feel valued and empowered to lean on their strengths.

out the project's activities. This includes checking for implicit assumptions or biases, discussing the project approach, and ensuring the project is not complicit in perpetuating deficit-focused narratives.

2. ***Provide feedback on project approach and materials.*** The EWG provides input on the planned project approaches and on materials presented to them by the study team.
3. ***Assess the interpretation of data and findings from study efforts.*** The EWG will add to the interpretation of data the study team will collect throughout the study, ensuring that any findings from the project are disseminated in a way that is assets-based, relevant, accurate, and reflect more than just researchers' perspectives.
4. ***Inform research, practice, and programming.*** The EWG serves as a resource to leverage academic, practical, and lived expertise to strengthen and promote the lives of Black families, youth, fathers, mothers, and individuals.

Identification of EWG members

The study team members identified individuals with relevant experience and expertise through their personal and professional networks and through recommendations from federal partners. The study team invited potential members based on their areas of expertise and potential contributions to the project.

Structure of EWG meetings

The first set of REFRAME's EWG meetings occurred monthly between February and April 2022, and eight to ten individuals attended each time. Membership on the EWG is fluid and will rotate over the course of the project. EWG members who serve on this project are asked to attend a minimum of three meetings overall. During the meetings, they shared their ideas, suggestions, and feedback on the project activities and implementation. Future meetings are scheduled for early 2023. Moving forward, to ensure inclusivity of diverse perspectives and avoid the development of groupthink norms, the study team will seek to bring on new members throughout the project period.

What lessons have been learned as REFRAME centers Black voices and applies a strengths-based perspective?

The study team is taking steps to examine and uncover existing power dynamics in the HMRF field, in order to identify (a) how they may manifest in programming, and (b) how they may influence the project activities. Based on these discussions, we will work to adapt our project approach, including data collection and analysis, knowledge synthesis, and dissemination. Below are specific activities completed with the EWG so far that reflect this application and highlight the lessons learned. This approach led the study team to build a data collection plan that prioritizes considerations of diverse viewpoints, identifies strengths and resilience within Black populations, and explores methods of shifting power dynamics toward shared ownership of the evaluation process.

Considering diverse viewpoints: The study team and the EWG conducted a Perspective Microscope Exercise⁵ to brainstorm strategies, needs, and priorities of HMRF grantees to better serve Black

⁵ Heather Krause, "Foundations of Data Equity," Krause, (We All Count, 2022).

individuals and couples. The goal of the activity was to increase equity by intentionally asking for viewpoints that the study team may not have considered otherwise.

The Perspective Microscope Exercise activity was an effective tool in intentionally elevating attention to the viewpoints that may be excluded in conventional study designs and getting input from the EWG on relevant and appropriate questions for the focus groups and community listening sessions. Examples of questions that emerged for HMRF programs and community members were:

- How are the programs contributing to Black entrepreneurship?
- What does it mean to thrive?
- How can we reformulate policies so that they support rather than disrupt the well-being of Black families and individuals?

The Perspective Microscope Exercise brainstorming activity conducted with the EWG also highlighted specific needs and challenges HMRF grantees have related to HMRF program curricula and services. For example:

- There is a need for relevant and culturally appropriate curricula in HMRF programs.
- Program materials should acknowledge the realities of Black families and relationships and not perpetuate negative connotations of fathers.
- Youth need age-appropriate and actionable tools to help strengthen their skills and knowledge to transition into adulthood.
- Participants want support with co-parenting, childcare, and the education of their children.

The Perspective Microscope Exercise helped the study team focus on often-underrepresented viewpoints--including those of Black mothers, fathers, and youth--and prioritize those viewpoints in developing questions for focus groups and planning other project activities.

Prioritizing strengths-based questions: The study team prioritized the perspectives of the EWG members, researchers, curriculum developers, HMRF grantees and Black participants served by HMRF programs (i.e., adult individuals, youth, and adult couples) as it developed questions for the focus groups. The focus group questions and discussion guides for the study reflect the application of a strengths-based lens that explores participants' self-determination and assets. The study team's use of this lens was consistent with input shared by the EWG, which made it clear early on that taking a strengths-based approach is imperative in every aspect and stage of this work. For example, experts discussed how deficits-focused language, such as the term "responsible fatherhood" in the program's

legislative code,⁶ may perpetuate harmful narratives about Black fathers being “absent” or “irresponsible.” The experts also expressed the potential value of developing programs in cooperation with Black participants in a way that acknowledges and integrates their perspectives. Based on the feedback the EWG provided, the study team designed the focus group questions to gain more clarity on how programs integrate participants feedback into service delivery, position individuals as resourceful and resilient in the face of structural barriers and adversity, and focus on future outcomes. Examples of focus group questions emphasizing a strengths-based perspective include:

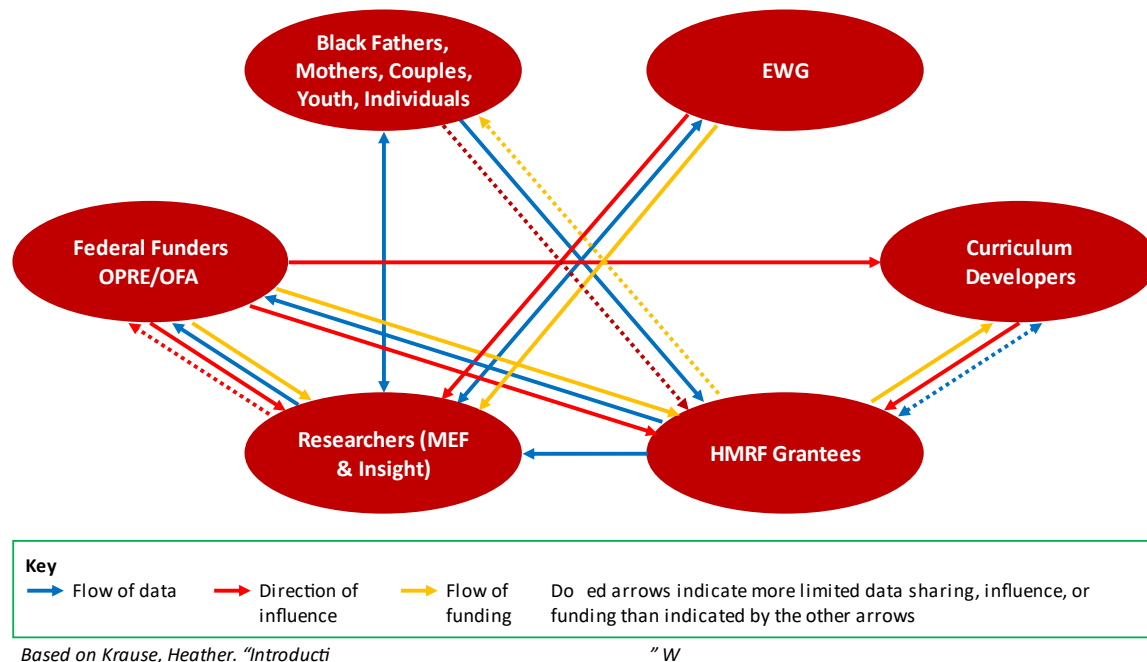
- What do you see as the most valuable or notable strengths, assets, and resiliencies in the Black clients you serve?
- Can you share an example of a time when you effectively addressed a challenge impacting you?

Addressing existing power dynamics: The study team applied techniques to identify existing power dynamics that influence the project’s work and ensure the EWG, HMRF participants, and community members invested in the project’s outputs can provide input and contribute to decision-making. During the early stages of the project, the study team conducted the Power Web Exercise⁷ with the EWG to discuss existing power dynamics between different groups including HMRF grantees, curriculum developers, researchers, federal funders and HMRF program participants. The goal of the activity was to promote transparency about the power dynamics of three key elements—funding, data, and influence—and to identify ways of rebalancing power and promoting inclusivity within the project. The study team created and presented a preliminary version of a power web to the EWG to serve as the basis of a discussion about power dynamics to help guide the project. They then revised the power web collaboratively with the EWG based on the discussion to better capture the dynamics, elements, and relationships within the REFRAME project. The changes included adding fragmented lines to the diagram to indicate a constrained flow of funding, data, or influence between two groups. For example, the study team added a fragmented *funding* line toward Black community members (Black fathers, mothers, couples, youth, and individuals) indicating small monetary incentives provided by HMRF grantees to Black clients. The limited power of Black community members on HMRF grantees, relative to federal funders and curriculum developers is depicted with a fragmented *influence* line. Based on feedback from the EWG the study team also added a unidirectional *data* line indicating data sharing from grantees to curriculum developers. Figure 1 presents the revised power web that resulted from the exercise. The study team will periodically revisit the power web with the EWG to assess the degree to which the project is promoting appropriate power distribution throughout the project.

⁶ [42 U.S.C. §603\(a\)\(2\)](#).

⁷ Heather Krause, “Introduction to the Funding Web” (We All Count, July 25, 2020).
<https://weallcount.com/2020/07/24/introduction-to-the-funding-web/>.

Figure 1: Balancing Power and Inclusivity Web Diagram



The project will prioritize building tools to help grantees share relevant information with curriculum developers and consider methods of sharing findings with various audiences including HMRF grantees and Black individuals and families.

What's next for the REFRAME project?

The study team began convening and facilitating HMRF grantee focus groups and community group listening sessions during late summer 2022. The HMRF grantee focus groups and community listening sessions were designed to help the study team identify the strategies and needs of HMRF grantees to better serve Black individuals, youth, and couples, and gain perspectives on sources of strengths and systemic barriers impacting both HMRF program participants and participants in other (non-HMRF funded) community organizations. The study team plans to share the findings of these activities in a report in 2023.

The study team will continue engaging with the EWG and federal partners to develop research questions and conduct a literature review documenting resiliencies of Black communities and strength-based approaches for Black individuals and couples. The study team will examine existing literature to document best practices for supporting Black families; knowledge gaps; and opportunities to lift voices, promote strengths-based narratives, and tailor supports for Black individuals and couples. Throughout the remainder of the project, the frequency of EWG meetings and the EWG membership will reflect the project's needs and focus at various stages of project activities.

The study team is regularly using a cultural diversity and cultural competency self-assessment checklist to evaluate how its current practice incorporates the principles and methods of cultural competence and racial equity lens.⁸ Members of the study team take this assessment to identify any gaps in the project’s efforts to be culturally responsive and discuss how the equitable approach to the project may be adjusted or improved. The assessment will serve as a tool to keep the study team accountable and help ensure harm is not being perpetuated throughout the project.

The study team is committed to centering its work around uplifting the assets, strengths and resiliency of Black individuals, couples, and youth. EWG members shared that it was vital to take this strength-based approach to understanding Black clients and how the structure and implementation of HMRF programs have been responsive to the needs of Black communities. This means understanding how Black individuals and couples thrive in the face of adversity and structural barriers, and how HMRF programs can be better equipped to support Black clients as they pursue success.

⁸ The cultural diversity and cultural competency self-assessment checklist used by the study team comes from Public Policy Associates, Inc., “Is My Evaluation Practice Culturally Responsive?” (2015). https://publicpolicy.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/REL_Self_Assessment_rev_Sept_2015.pdf.

There is not a single definition of “cultural competency.” The study team uses a definition adapted from the discussion in The National Center for Cultural Competence, “Definitions of Cultural Competence,” <https://nccc.georgetown.edu/curricula/culturalcompetence.html>: the ability of an individual to understand and respect values, attitudes, beliefs, and mores that differ across cultures and subcultures, and to consider and respond appropriately to these differences in planning, implementing, and evaluating human services programs and interventions. This goes hand in hand with “cultural humility,” which involves a dynamic process of self-reflection and critique, acknowledging one’s own biases, and understanding the complexity of identities. For a discussion of how the frameworks of cultural competency and cultural humility are connected, and how both are necessary for effective services, see Shamalia Khan, “Cultural Humility vs. Cultural Competence — and Why Providers Need Both” (HealthCity, 2021), <https://healthcity.bmc.org/policy-and-industry/cultural-humility-vs-cultural-competence-providers-need-both>.