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Julianne McGill  
Auburn University, [mclanjm@auburn.edu](mailto:mclanjm@auburn.edu)

Francesca Adler-Baeder  
Auburn University

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## Teaching Couple Relationship Education: The Influence on Regional Extension Agents and Family Life Educators

Julianne McGill

Francesca Adler-Baeder

Auburn University

*Couple Relationship Education (CRE) programs are a prevention resource used to assist adult individuals, couples, and families reduce relationship distress and improve prosocial behaviors. Regional Extension agents (REAs) and other community family life educators (FLEs) who teach CRE are involved in a facilitation process that develops relationships and rapport with their participants similar to other helping relationships. To date, no published research has focused on how CRE may affect the REAs/FLEs who provide the programs through community adult education programs. Informed by relational-cultural theory and the ecological systems perspective, the current study focused on assessing change in ten outcomes measuring REAs/FLEs' (N = 54) individual, couple, and co-parenting functioning and whether that change differed by gender. Results from repeated measure ANCOVAs indicate REAs/FLEs experience gains across several domains of functioning. There were no differences by gender. Implications for REAs/FLEs and suggestions for future research are described.*

**Keywords:** Extension agents, family life educators, couple and relationship education, individual functioning, couple skills, co-parenting skills

### Introduction

Couple Relationship Education (CRE) programs are a prevention resource used to assist adult individuals, couples, and families reduce relationship distress, improve prosocial behaviors, regulate irrational thoughts and emotions, and cope with depressive symptoms (Halford, Markman, Kline, & Stanley, 2003; Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2008). Recently, Wadsworth and Markman (2012) suggested that the new generation of CRE research focus on the context of CRE or explorations of the implementation process, which is formed largely due to regional Extension agents' (REAs) and family life educators' (FLEs) efforts. REAs/FLEs who teach CRE are involved in a facilitation process that develops relationships and rapport with their participants similar to other helping relationships. Previous research indicates generally positive effects of developing learning relationships for adult helpers (i.e., mentors or therapists), but no published research has focused on how CRE may affect the REAs/FLEs who provide the

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Direct correspondence for this article to Julianne McGill at [mclanjm@auburn.edu](mailto:mclanjm@auburn.edu)

programs, even though they are intricately involved in the process. This study was informed by aspects of relational-cultural theory (Miller, 1976), the feminist perspective (Gilligan, 1982), and the ecological systems perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which suggest a transactional effect of individuals growing and learning within “growth fostering” relationships. Therefore, this study assessed the effect of teaching CRE, a community adult education program, on REAs/FLEs who work with youth, adults, and couples.

## **Background**

There has been extensive research evaluating CRE programs that target healthy attitudes and behaviors for youth participants and the promotion of relationship quality for adult participants. There have been a multitude of individual studies evaluating CRE that have focused on individual functioning, couple functioning, and co-parenting functioning. Benefits to the individual, the improvement in relationship skills including co-parenting abilities, and the promotion of relationship functioning have been documented in this research.

Individual outcomes such as depression, individual empowerment, communication skills, and conflict resolution skills have been assessed and generally, are positively affected by the programs (Adler-Baeder et al., 2010; Bradford et al., 2014; Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2008). There is also evidence that couple level outcomes are positively affected by relationship education programs. Specifically, dedication to the relationship and relationship satisfaction were found to be positively influenced by participation (Amato, 2014; Laurenceau, Stanley, Olmos-Gallo, Baucom, & Markman, 2004; Owen et al., 2012). Finally, there is evidence that the functioning of the co-parenting relationship is positively affected by relationship education participation. Co-parenting conflict, parental involvement, and disciplining practices have improved after program completion (Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, & Gillette, 2014; Dion & Hershey, 2010; Halford, Petch, & Creedy, 2010; Lucier-Greer, Adler-Baeder, Ketring, Harcourt, & Smith, 2012).

Overall, there is evidence that participants experience positive changes in multiple domains following completion of relationship education programs. To date, however, there is no study that has focused on changes experienced by the REAs/FLEs who facilitate the CRE programs in communities even though theories focused on the transactional nature of relationships would expect similar effects for CRE facilitators.

## **Theory**

In general, evaluation studies of community adult education programs, including CRE, tend to ignore theories, even though drawing from theories enables us to address gaps in the literature (Carroll & Doherty, 2003). Thus, the explicit integration of assumptions from the relational-

cultural theory, the feminist perspective, and the ecological systems theory inform this study. Assumptions of the relational-cultural theory (Miller, 1976), which is derived from symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969), suggest that individuals develop within relationships with others. This assumption specifically recognizes that “growth fostering relationships” are essential to the development and well-being of individuals. In other words, contributing to another’s growth, may in turn add to the development of your own growth trajectory. This “growth fostering” aspect is a characteristic of a good REA/FLE-participant relationship and therefore may affect the well-being of the regional Extension agent or family life educator. Further, the feminist perspective (Gilligan, 1982) suggests a need to consider gender differences because women are more apt to focus on their own development and well-being within the context of relationships (Kirkpatrick-Johnson, Beebe, Mortimer, & Snyder, 1998). Therefore, female REAs/FLEs may experience even greater benefits.

Finally, an ecological systems perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) informs this work because it assumes subsystems (i.e., the individual, couple, and larger family) are interconnected. Thus, improvements in couple functioning, which is the focused goal of CRE, may also improve individual and family functioning. In fact, as previously noted, CRE evaluation research has found positive effects for these related domains (Adler-Baeder et al., 2010; Amato, 2014; Bradford et al., 2014; Cowan et al., 2014; Dion & Hershey, 2010; Halford et al., 2010; Hawkins et al., 2008; Laurenceau et al., 2004; Lucier-Greer et al., 2012; Owen et al., 2012).

The combination and complementary aspects of these theories guide the current study to assess the possible influence of the effect of providing CRE for community adult participants on REAs/FLEs. In addition, these theories inform the exploration of differences by gender and effects in multiple domains of functioning. Though the theories presented here support these assumptions, no previous literature has specifically looked at the effect of teaching relationship education on regional Extension agents or family life educators; therefore, related literature from conceptually similar helping relationships was used to inform the present study.

### **Related Literature**

Previous work assessing the effect on the helper in a relationship focuses on mentors in formal programs and therapists. These relationships are conceptually similar to the FLE-participant relationship because the focus of effort and benefit tends to be on the one “in need” and may be viewed as more unidirectional. Though the context of experiences may differ for mentors and therapists compared to REAs/FLEs, studies of their outcomes provided additional information helpful to the present study.

There are a handful of studies that indicate being a mentor positively affects the individual personally and professionally. The outcomes reported by the mentors tend to align with the

goals of the program for the mentee. For example positive outcomes include a greater understanding of future goals or purpose (Black et al., 2010; McGill, Adler-Baeder, Kerpelman, & Sollie, 2015; Reddick, Griffin, & Cherwitz, 2011; Slaughter-Defoe & English-Clarke, 2010), greater connectedness to others (Karcher, 2009; McGill et al., 2015), and cognitive growth (Dolan & Johnson, 2009, McGill et al., 2015). Furthermore, mentoring in an educational setting, where more advanced teachers mentor and guide beginning teachers, is associated with benefits for the adult teacher-mentor. Specifically, teacher-mentors reported enhancement in teaching skills (Eby, Durley, Evans, & Ragins, 2006; Ganser, 1994; Iancu-Haddad & Oplatka, 2009; Liu, Liu, Kwan, & Mao, 2009) and personal and job satisfaction (Eby et al., 2006; Iancu-Haddad & Oplatka, 2009).

There is also some evidence that therapists experience positive outcomes, which may be especially relevant to the current study because family therapists are becoming increasingly involved in community adult education programs, specifically couple relationship education programs (Markman & Rhoades, 2012). Generally, therapists and therapists-in-training report personal growth and satisfaction, general learning about the information shared in session, and greater self-awareness. Further, therapists in training reported experiencing a reciprocal effect between professional gains and gains in their personal lives (e.g., Linley & Joseph, 2007; Paris, Linville, & Rosen, 2006; Sandberg, Knestel, & Cluff Schade, 2013).

Although the amount of research is small, there is evidence that helpers in helping relationships benefit from their role. Furthermore, a transactional and relational-cultural perspective would suggest that REAs/FLEs' interactions with program participants offer them an opportunity to grow and learn.

### Current Study

Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to assess the effect of teaching relationship education programs on the REAs/FLEs who provide the programs to individuals in the community.

**Hypothesis 1 (H1):** Regional Extension agents and family life educators will report gains in individual, couple, and co-parenting functioning controlling for age, experience, race, and marital status.

**Research question 1 (RQ1):** Are there differences in reported gains based on the gender of the regional Extension agent or family life educator controlling for age, experience, race, and marital status?

## Methods

### Participants

The initial sample of CRE educators was comprised of 54 individuals. These individuals were teachers who focus on strengthening individual and family interactions and improving quality of life through community adult education efforts. Respondents were regional Extension agents and community family life educators in Alabama trained by faculty and staff working with a federally-funded grant focused on implementing relationship education programs in diverse communities. There were no inclusion or exclusion criteria to be in the study besides being trained in relationship education curricula and having some experience implementing these programs in the field.

The sample of educators in this study was relatively diverse; the majority reported being European-American (67%), and 32% reported being African-American. Overall, the majority (67%) of REAs/FLEs reported being female and married (65%). The average age of the sample was about 40 years old. The REAs/FLEs ranged in experience (6 months to 12 years), but the average experience teaching CRE programs was 3 years. Approximately 30% of the sample had a clinical background as a counselor, therapist, or social worker, but were primarily working as community adult educators at the time of data collection.

### Procedure

Regional Extension agents and community family life educators were trained in pertinent CRE curricula and teaching methods before beginning to teach CRE for individuals, couples, and families in the community. At a later time, the REAs/FLEs were asked to complete a retrospective survey that assessed their knowledge and behaviors before beginning to teach CRE programs, and then in the present after teaching CRE programs for at least 6 months. Survey questions were developed by the research team to address the seven core skills for healthy relationships as described in the National Extension and Relationship and Marriage Education Model (Futris & Adler-Baeder, 2014), which are the focus of the CRE community classes.

The self-reported measure of changes using the retrospective approach avoids bias at the pretest associated with over- or underestimation of knowledge (Pratt, McGuigan, & Katzev, 2000). Pratt and colleagues (2000) found that the post plus retrospective approach created a more valid assessment of the perceived effect of programs than the traditional pretest-posttest measurement. They further argue that after participation in an educational program, participants may report a shift in the perception of what they knew before receiving the program. Because of this initial over- or underestimation issue, traditional pretest-posttest assessments may not capture the change that occurred due to the education.

## Measures

The National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Model (Futris & Adler-Baeder, 2014) serves as a framework for the evaluation of CRE program content and was used in the current study to assess the effect of teaching CRE on REAs/FLEs. NERMEM was developed based on an extensive review of the couple relationship research literature in order to inform best practices for CRE implementation. The NERMEM developers thematically summarized the existing literature into research-based core relationship principles and skills that have been shown to be predictive of high relationship quality and stability.

The seven core components of NERMEM include *Choose* – intentionality of relationship choices, *Care for Self* – maintaining wellness, *Know* – understanding the other's world, *Care* – using positive behaviors toward the other, *Share* – developing a sense of relationship identity, *Manage* – using healthy behaviors in the context of conflict, and *Connect* – engaging in a supportive social network. These components represent both individual and relational (couple or co-parenting) skills.

**Individual skills.** Three measures were utilized to assess individual skills before and after teaching CRE programs. The NERMEM concepts of Care for Self, Manage, and Connect are included in the individual skills category. Though all of these concepts are focused on relationships, the emphasis is on the ability of the individual to engage in such behaviors. REAs/FLEs responded on a four-point Likert scale from 1 (*Never or Poor*) to 4 (*Regularly or Excellent*).

*Care for self.* For this measure, we used two questions: “My ability to identify self-care needs was/is,” and “I used/use self-care skills.” Reliability was good (*Cronbach's*  $\alpha = .73$ ).

*Manage.* For this measure, we used two questions: “My knowledge of strategies for positive conflict management was/is,” and “I used/use strategies for positive conflict management.” Reliability was good (*Cronbach's*  $\alpha = .77$ ).

*Connect.* For this measure, we used four questions: “My knowledge of the value of connection to sources of support and strength was/is,” “My knowledge of strategies for connecting to community resources was/is,” “My knowledge of strategies for engaging positive social support was/is,” and “I used/use strategies for connecting to sources of support and strength.” Reliability was good (*Cronbach's*  $\alpha = .85$ ).

**Couple skills.** Four measures were utilized to assess couple functioning before and after teaching CRE programs. The NERMEM concepts of Know, Care, Share, and Choose are

included in the couple category. REAs/FLEs responded on a four-point Likert scale from 1 (*Never or Poor*) to 4 (*Regularly or Excellent*).

*Know.* For this measure, we used two questions: “My knowledge of ways to get to know my romantic partner/significant other in a deeper way was/is,” and “I used/use skills to get to know my romantic partner/significant other in a deeper way.” Reliability was acceptable (*Cronbach’s*  $\alpha = .69$ ).

*Care.* For this measure, we used two questions: “My knowledge of ways to demonstrate kindness and respect for my significant other was/is,” and “I used/use skills that demonstrate kindness, affection, and respect for my romantic partner/significant other.” Reliability was acceptable (*Cronbach’s*  $\alpha = .67$ ).

*Share.* For this measure, we used two questions: “My knowledge of ways to develop a sense of ‘we-ness’ or togetherness with my romantic partner/significant other was/is,” and “I used/use strategies for developing a sense of ‘we-ness’ or togetherness with my romantic partner/significant other.” Reliability was good (*Cronbach’s*  $\alpha = .85$ ).

*Choose.* For this measure, we used a single question: “I made/make efforts to develop and maintain a healthy couple relationship.”

**Co-parenting skills.** Fifty-four percent of the facilitators reported having some type of co-parenting relationship. Three measures were utilized to assess co-parenting functioning before and after teaching CRE programs. The NERMEM concepts that are included in the co-parenting functioning section are similar to the ones included in the couple functioning section but focused on the co-parent instead of the romantic partner. REAs/FLEs responded on a four-point Likert scale from 1 (*Never or Poor*) to 4 (*Regularly or Excellent*).

*Know.* For this measure, we used two questions: “My knowledge of ways to get to know my co-parent in a deeper way was/is,” and “I used/use skills to get to know my co-parent in a deeper way.” Reliability was good (*Cronbach’s*  $\alpha = .82$ ).

*Care.* For this measure, we used two questions: “My knowledge of ways to demonstrate kindness and respect for my co-parent was/is,” and “I used/use skills that demonstrate kindness, affection, and respect for my co-parent.” Reliability was acceptable (*Cronbach’s*  $\alpha = .65$ ).

*Choose.* For this measure, we used a single question: “I made/make efforts to develop and maintain a healthy co-parenting relationship.”



**Controls.** Covariates were included in the RMANCOVAs but were removed from analyses if they were nonsignificant. Age was included as a continuous variable. Experience as a CRE educator was utilized as a continuous variable, and the unit of measurement was in years. Ethnicity was dichotomized to be European American or non-European American. Similarly, marital status was dichotomized to be married or nonmarried.

**Open-ended question.** One open-ended question was included on the survey to allow educators to elaborate on their answers and share their experience as a CRE facilitator. The question stated, "Please use this space to write about facilitating RME." Of the 54 CRE educators, 31 (57%) responded to the open-ended question.

## Results

### Gains for Regional Extension Agents and Family Life Educators

To test H1 that regional Extension agents and family life educators would report gains in individual, couple, and co-parenting functioning and RQ1 in order to examine whether gains differ by gender, we conducted Repeated Measure Analysis of Covariance (RMANCOVA) models where gender was the between-groups factor. Gender was coded as 0 = male and 1 = female.

**Individual skills.** It was expected that implementing CRE would result in positive changes on measures of Care for Self, Manage, and Connection after controlling for significant covariates. The RMANCOVA results (Table 1) indicates partial support for the main effects hypothesis related to individual skills. Care for Self did not significantly change for REAs/FLEs [ $F(1, 44) = .13, p = \text{NS}$ ], but results related to Manage [ $F(1, 51) = 86.35, p < .001$ ] and Connect [ $F(1, 51) = 93.92, p < .001$ ] showed significant and positive change. The average effect size for enhancement of individual skills for Manage and Connect was large ( $d = 1.43$ ; Cohen, 1977). Related to RQ1, the interaction effect of time X gender was nonsignificant for each of the individual skills, suggesting male and female REAs/FLEs benefitted equally.

**Table 1. RMANCOVA Results for Educators' Individual Skills, Controlling for Significant Covariates**

	Care for Self						Manage						Connection					
	Pre			Post			Pre			Post			Pre			Post		
	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>
Time (Main Effect)	53	2.97	.62	3.58	.42	.13	53	2.77	.63	3.66	.42	<b>86.35</b>	53	2.81	.61	3.58	.38	<b>93.92</b>
Time x Gender						.03						1.11						.34
Male	16	3.03	.63	3.56	.50		17	2.72	.75	3.68	.43		17	2.68	.58	3.49	.44	
Female	31	2.97	.63	3.60	.39		36	2.83	.60	3.65	.43		36	2.89	.61	3.63	.35	
Cohen's <i>d</i>				--						1.36								1.49

*Note:* Bold coefficient indicates significance level of  $p < .01$  or higher.

*N* = Number of participants; *M* = Mean; *SD* = Standard Deviation; *F* = Fisher's F ratio

**Couple skills.** It was expected that implementing CRE would result in positive changes on measures of Knowing Partner, Caring for Partner, Choosing Partner, and Sharing with Partner. The RMANCOVA results (Table 2) indicate support for the main effects hypothesis related to couple skills. Results indicated significant positive changes in Knowing Partner [ $F(1, 40) = 91.92, p < .001$ ], Caring for Partner [ $F(1, 40) = 57.42, p < .001$ ], Choosing Partner [ $F(1, 34) = 17.30, p < .001$ ], and Sharing with Partner [ $F(1, 27) = 9.77, p < .01$ ] after implementing CRE. The average effect size for change in couple skills was large ( $d = 1.21$ ; Cohen, 1977). The interaction effect of time X gender was nonsignificant for each of the couple skills, suggesting that male and female REAs/FLEs benefitted equally in their couple skills.

**Table 2. RMANCOVA Results for Educators' Couple Skills, Controlling for Significant Covariates**

	<b>Know</b>						<b>Care</b>						
	<u>Pre</u>			<u>Post</u>			<u>Pre</u>			<u>Post</u>			
	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>	
Time													
(Main Effect)	42	2.95	.61	3.71	.42	<b>91.92</b>	42	3.24	.46	3.81	.37	<b>57.42</b>	
Time x Gender						1.40						.12	
Male	15	2.93	.62	3.75	.43		15	3.23	.56	3.79	.38		
Female	28	3.00	.64	3.70	.42		28	3.27	.42	3.82	.37		
Cohen's <i>d</i>				1.59						1.24			
	<b>Choose</b>						<b>Share</b>						
	<u>Pre</u>			<u>Post</u>			<u>Pre</u>			<u>Post</u>			
	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>	
Time													
(Main Effect)	36	3.33	.63	3.83	.38	<b>17.30</b>	37	2.98	.66	3.68	.50	<b>9.77</b>	
Time x Gender						.63						.13	
Male	14	3.36	.50	3.69	.48		14	3.07	.51	3.73	.44		
Female	23	3.35	.71	3.91	.29		24	2.98	.76	3.65	.54		
Cohen's <i>d</i>				.80						1.19			

Note: Bold coefficient indicates significance level of  $p < .01$  or higher.

*N* = Number of participants; *M* = Mean; *SD* = Standard Deviation; *F* = Fisher's F ratio

**Co-parenting skills.** It was expected that implementing CRE would result in positive changes on measures of Knowing Co-parent, Caring for Co-parent, and Choosing Co-parent. The RMANCOVA results (Table 3) indicate support for the main effects hypothesis related to co-parenting skills. Results indicated significant positive changes in Knowing Co-parent [ $F(1, 29) = 51.25, p < .001$ ], Caring for Co-parent [ $F(1, 28) = 23.33, p < .001$ ], and Choosing Co-parent [ $F(1, 34) = 17.30, p < .001$ ]. The average effect size for change in co-parenting skills was large ( $d = 1.19$ ; Cohen, 1977). The interaction effect of time X gender was nonsignificant for co-parenting, suggesting that male and female family life benefitted similarly.

**Table 3. RMANCOVA Results for Educators' Co-Parenting Skills, Controlling for Significant Covariates**

	Know						Care						Choose					
	Pre			Post			Pre			Post			Pre			Post		
	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>
Time (Main Effect)	30	3.05	.55	3.68	.40	<b>51.25</b>	30	3.33	.53	3.80	.34	<b>23.33</b>	36	3.40	.56	3.90	.31	<b>24.15</b>
Time x Gender						1.38						.23						.63
Male	12	3.00	.52	3.55	.47		12	3.38	.53	3.77	.34		12	3.50	.67	3.82	.40	
Female	20	3.08	.87	3.76	.35		20	3.30	.52	3.82	.34		20	3.35	.49	3.95	.23	
Cohen's <i>d</i>				1.45						1.02						1.09		

*Note:* Bold coefficient indicates significance level of  $p < .01$  or higher.

*N* = Number of participants; *M* = Mean; *SD* = Standard Deviation; *F* = Fisher's F ratio

In sum, we hypothesized that REAs/FLEs would report gains in individual, couple, and co-parenting functioning controlling for significant covariates, and that was supported. One (Care for Self) out of the ten outcomes was nonsignificant, indicating positive outcomes in a range of domains. Further, we explored whether there were differences in reported gains based on the gender of the educator. We found no significant time X gender interactions, suggesting that REAs/FLEs of either gender experience positive effects of facilitating CRE programs.

## Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to assess the perception of the effect of teaching relationship education programs on the regional Extension agents and community family life educators who provide adult education programs in the community. Further, we explored differential effects of teaching based on the gender of the educator. There are no published studies of the effects of teaching CRE on FLEs, although parallel research on professionals in other helping roles (i.e., therapists and mentors) suggests there are likely positive effects.

The findings of the current study suggest that agents and educators use the information they teach in the relationship education programs in their own couple and co-parenting relationships. We also note the large effect sizes that are well above the level suggested for “practical” and meaningful change following participation in an educational program (i.e.,  $> .25$ ; Wolf, 1986). Qualitative comments obtained from an open-ended question on the survey also provide evidence that agents and educators connect to the material they are teaching and use it to effect positive change in their personal lives. For example, one female educator said, “Facilitating [CRE] has been informative and interesting. It has contributed to my personal growth.” A male educator wrote, “[the classes] keep me aware of what I need to be doing in my own relationship.” Another female educator wrote, “I realized unhealthy parenting [practices] I had. Even having been a teen parent, I wish I had this class.”

## Limitations

The sample used in the current study is rather small and limits generalizability. Further, the methods used in the current study tapped reports of measures (skills and relationship quality) from a single responder. While symbolic interactionist thought includes the assumption that if it is “perceived as real; it is real in its consequences” (Thomas & Thomas, 1928), providing support for survey research methods using one perspective, future research in this area would benefit from multiple informants, particularly on measures of dyadic relationship skills and quality (i.e., from couple and coparenting partners). In addition, only two time points are utilized. The collection of data on outcomes over time would more clearly delineate trajectories of growth.

## Implications for Community Adult Educators

Interestingly, the only area in which REAs/FLEs did not perceive a significant and positive change was in the area of “caring for self.” It may be that they were already doing a fairly good job in this area, since their mean level of 2.97 would indicate they were “good” at these skills at baseline (range = 1 – 4). It may also be evidence of a phenomenon found in some studies of those in helping professions: that they often neglect their own self-care. Some research indicates

helpers may have especially altruistic personalities that may lead to compassion fatigue or burnout (Linley & Joseph, 2007). Further, it may be that helpers focus on helping others and do not engage in caring behaviors towards themselves (Linley & Joseph, 2007). Therefore, an important implication of this study is to strongly encourage self-care practices of REAs/FLEs and other community adult educators (e.g., healthy eating, exercise, meditation) (Richards, Campenni, & Muse-Burke, 2010).

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Although we expected, based on a feminist perspective, that women would be more likely to perceive benefits in their personal lives from the REA/FLE experience than men, there were no gender effects. It may be that men who choose to teach CRE are more attuned to the value of healthy relationships and incorporate into their own identity the function of their relationships more than the average male. Previous studies of the effects on therapists and mentors have not included tests of moderation by gender; therefore, we cannot compare previous findings to ours. Although we did not find evidence of moderation, it is still a valuable exercise in research to examine factors that influence outcomes. In our study, experience level and age of the CRE educator were significant covariates. These and other characteristics of the person and the context can be further assessed as moderators of the program experience for agents and educators.

In the current study, we assessed only measures of potential positive effects of providing CRE. Future studies can consider the inclusion of assessments of potential negative effects as well. Some recent studies of “helpers” find negative outcomes, such as role overload and burnout (Dolan & Johnson, 2009; Linley & Joseph, 2007; Reddick et al., 2011). A recent study articulated a conceptual framework based on qualitative interviews with mentors in which challenges may exist in a mentor-mentee relationship that may impede the benefits experienced by the mentor (McGill et al., 2015). These include programmatic challenges (e.g., time commitment), relational challenges (e.g., resistance by participant), and individual challenges (e.g., feeling unprepared as the “helper”). This may be utilized and adapted as a framework for studying the experience of community adult educators.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the findings of this study support the assumptions from relational-cultural theory (Miller, 1976) and a systems perspective that suggest engaging in a “growth fostering relationship” benefits both the targeted participant as well as the helper. We found perceptions of positive effects for regional Extension agents and community family life educators related to individual skills, couple functioning, and co-parenting functioning. This transactional and spillover effect on the helpers in these community educational services focused on adult learners

is similar to those seen in studies of clinicians (Linley & Joseph, 2007; Paris et al., 2006). Considering and documenting additional benefits resulting from community adult education programs, including CRE, implementation is a worthwhile endeavor for both the study of individual development and community adult education program effects.

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*Dr. Julianne McGill* is an assistant research professor working in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at Auburn University.

*Dr. Francesca Adler-Baeder* is a professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at Auburn University.