

## *Family-Life Education Potential*

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*Extension is making exciting new thrusts in the area of family-life education. Three of these new directions are explored in this article. The author presents some of the methods and programs used to further these new emphases, and challenges Extension personnel as to their roles in the future.*

IN A BOSTON housing unit, low-income parents are participating in programs on understanding adolescents, using material adapted from those designed for middle-class audiences. In a Michigan high school, 1100 youths engage in student-led small-group discussions after viewing a closed-circuit television program. In Oregon, small special-interest groups meet in homes for a "coffee-hour discussion," using a phonograph record that features the state specialist in Family Life and a trained lay leader discussing "Early Marriage."

These events point up some of the new directions being taken by Extension in the area of family-life education. These new thrusts, to be treated in the following discussion, might be identified as follows:

1. Much greater emphasis is being placed on *understanding human relationships* and on the importance of knowledge about human development; there is concern for human behavior.
2. *New audiences* are being reached as we interpret our program to more and more urban people, with subsequent changes from the "traditional" Extension and 4-H Club activities.
3. *New methods* are being developed for reaching audiences.

### CONCERN FOR HUMAN BEHAVIOR

A rapid increase in the number of state specialists in family life is the most convincing evidence of the new emphasis on concern for

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human behavior. Some 40 or more states now have from one to four specialists on their staffs; 12 of these are men. Specialists are expected to keep up-to-date on subject matter and to provide the county Extension staff with resources, materials, study guides, and regular in-service training. They may also teach lay leaders and occasionally present subject matter in open meetings—statewide or for a special conference. Their programs are directed toward child development, family relationships, and human behavior, and are designed to help people (1) apply knowledge of child development in guiding children and youth, (2) work toward a more satisfying family life, (3) accept and understand social change as related to the family, and (4) understand the importance of a full and useful life for the older members of our society.

Increasing emphasis is also being given to the psychological factors in other projects, such as the behavioral factors concerning clothing choices (particularly of youth), the socio-psychological significance of nutritional choices, and the psychological dynamics of decision making in management programs.

We see here a shift in emphasis from subject matter to audience—from content orientation to person orientation. Another shift is part of this same general trend. Whereas Extension has been predominately producer oriented (the farmer improving his crops, the homemaker producing better food or garments), today we are more concerned about people as consumers. Thus, one of the five major areas in the "focus program" for the future is consumer competence. In other words, we have become more interested in people and their development, their knowledge, attitudes, and competence, and less interested in ideas and facts per se. Russ Mahan, state specialist in Iowa, puts it this way: "Parent education, we feel, should be an emotional as well as intellectual experience. Because of this we are as concerned with group structure and process as we are with whatever abstract concepts are being shared."<sup>1</sup>

If we look back to the 1914 Smith-Lever Act, we find that Cooperative Extension was established as "an aid in diffusing among the people of the United States useful and practical information on subjects relating to agriculture and home economics, and to encourage the application of the same. . . ." Extension's responsibility was to interpret research findings in popular terms and aid families in applying this research to the solution of their problems. Home economics extension began with programs designed primarily to serve farm women and youth by teaching better ways of doing such

<sup>1</sup> Russ Mahan, personal correspondence.

things as canning, dressmaking, and raising livestock. Even today many people see home economics extension only in terms of rural county Extension and 4-H Clubs, carrying on such programs.

However, Margaret Brown, Director of Home Economics, Federal Extension Service, interprets the founding purpose in home economics as "creating an awareness and understanding, and providing a knowledge that is basic for human development and family stability."<sup>2</sup> Ed Pope, Federal Extension Specialist in Human Development and Human Relations, says that, throughout its life span, the Extension Service intends to help individuals and groups develop the skills, insights, and knowledge needed to build strong family life, and to provide training in effective democratic leadership for the future.<sup>3</sup> These new directions are exciting and challenging. Let us examine some of the implications for our program.

The specialist is soon aware that these larger concerns for people make greater demands upon him. Not only must he keep up with developments in subject matter—for this phase of his work is not less important—he must know more about people. In general, greater concern for the audience demands knowledge of the communication process, awareness of how adults learn, and some understanding of the blocks one may encounter. No longer can we consider the audience as a cup to fill with helpful information, or as a sponge to absorb needed knowledge. The audience has become so diversified that we cannot assume automatic understanding of it. We need to find ways to determine the needs of our audience and to verify whether what we are doing is relative to those needs. This requires interaction with the people we are attempting to help, and feedback to legitimize our efforts. Providing for this necessary dynamic interchange, when mass media are being used, is a particularly acute challenge.

#### NEW AUDIENCES

In 1965, only 6.4 per cent of the population lived on farms.<sup>4</sup> In this major shift of population from farm to city, we find that rural areas are feeling the impact of urban influences in a variety of ways. Inevitably we find ourselves reaching out to people who are

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Brown, "On the Side of the Angels," address to the Annual Convention, American Home Economics Association, June, 1966, San Francisco, California.

<sup>3</sup> Edward V. Pope, "Extension Service Programs Affecting American Families," *Marriage and Family Living*, XX (August, 1958), 277.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Pocket Data Book, U.S.A. 1967* (Washington, D.C., 1967), p. 205.

more diversified in class, race, and religion. Many of our efforts, of course, relate to low-income audiences as we cooperate with the OEO (Office of Economic Opportunity) programs. With nearly half our population either under 19 or over 65, the needs of youth and the aged also take on new significance. The following examples illustrate programs resulting from these new directions.

In Michigan, a program for low-income mothers was developed in cooperation with the Welfare Department, capitalizing on parental aspirations for children. Lessons focused on such questions as "What kind of people do you want your children to become?" and "How do I look to my children?" In regard to the second question, children said they wanted their mothers to be neat and pretty and, more significantly, most wanted their parents to look and *act* more grown up. These can be strong incentives for parents to increase self-development. The program was an excellent example of community cooperation, as it was developed cooperatively by a number of groups: the Adult Education Department, Altrusa Club, Urban League, museum, church, and "Y" groups, in addition to Extension and Welfare.

Another evidence of cooperative effort is illustrated by the memorandum of agreement between Extension, Welfare, Farmer's Home Administration, and the Governors' Council on Aging. As a result of this agreement, lay leaders are being trained to work individually with older welfare recipients to improve homemaking skills and to organize senior citizen clubs. In working with low-income groups, one must first reach people through helping them with practical problems, before talking about more intangible goals such as attitudes. However, the training given to leaders includes sensitizing them to the importance of attitude development. Attitude change may come as a concomitant of appropriately handled content.

In the Boston housing-unit program mentioned earlier, it was found that reading and visual materials used primarily with middle-class white audiences in Extension clubs and PTA could be used effectively with lower-class people. The Boston group was predominately low-income (half the per capita average income of the city), of low educational level (ninth-grade average), and urban Negro, with half on welfare and a fourth receiving Aid to Dependent Children. Aided by skillful teaching, the parents quickly made the necessary adaptations to their own family situations of such materials as "How Much Affection?" and "Social Sex Attitudes in Adolescents." Attendance grew from eight or ten people in the beginning.

to groups of almost 100 as the program became more widely known.

These illustrations point up the importance of a program being relevant to the needs of the audience. As audiences become more diversified, with a variety of values, styles of life, and family backgrounds, we find ourselves challenged in many ways. Some people will resist the educational program of Extension. Considerable skill, patience, and understanding may be needed to break through the defensive shell—a shell often found among the disadvantaged. On the other hand, a highly educated and sophisticated audience may stretch our limits of competence in other directions.

#### NEW METHODS

Our third emphasis is developing new approaches for reaching larger audiences. Radio and television media have increasingly been utilized to bring Extension to more people. One of the most effective techniques is to use television in conjunction with other means of communication to motivate and alert a potential audience. One county in Missouri has developed a long-range program centering around the family life cycle. For the past four years, short courses and Extension club programs have been built around the central theme of the program, with television, radio, and newspapers being used for promotion.

Use of films is also increasing. North Carolina has a series of 15-minute films on "Adolescence—Search for Identity," produced in conjunction with PTA, mental health groups, University of North Carolina TV, and Extension. A significant feature of this program is availability of discussion guide material for small-group follow-up sessions.

The Oregon "phonograph-record program" referred to earlier is based on the traditional Extension use of the lay leader, but with a specialist assist from the state specialist. Through use of a record, the specialist provides content background and thought-provoking discussion questions. This medium allows the specialist to be "present" in many places at the same time—without traveling.

It can readily be seen that these developments require a new kind of lay-leader training. It is no longer adequate for the lay leader simply to hand out prepared material or read a printed lesson to the audience. It becomes increasingly important for the lay leader to have some type of competency in utilizing content material in a dynamic, audience-involving way. There are encouraging signs that

such competency may be more readily developed than one might expect. In Massachusetts, leaders were provided an intensive one-day training session in understanding the sexual development of children. The results were rewarding, judging from the satisfaction expressed by the leaders. The use of the phonograph records in Oregon illustrates an effective way to support a leader by providing her with a resource which authenticates her lesson but requires leader-participation interchange. After using the record for a while, leaders developed confidence and began conducting programs without it. These illustrations remind us not to undervalue the potential in lay leadership for the development of effective programs designed to reach wider audiences.

#### EVALUATION

One of the most difficult questions to answer in regard to Extension work is "How are we doing?" We are not alone in this concern. All family-life educators seek better ways to develop objective measures and adequate instruments to find out if changes are being made in the lives of people. Some specialists give information tests. Most, however, depend upon a combination of subjective responses—some delayed to avoid the immediate response. Here and there, special attempts are made to secure more scientifically careful judgments.

One such effort was made by the University of Missouri Rural Sociology Department in trying to assess the effectiveness of training programs for leader aides. While admittedly a pilot approach using a small sample, it was planned research to see if we could measure whether or not families changed as a result of contact with aides. Stated simply, the research was made on the basis of treatment and control groups. Domestic practices improved significantly in families participating in the treatment, as compared to the control group. It is true, of course, that family-life education is concerned with more than just improving ways of cooking and cleaning. However, it is well to remember that with low-income groups, these may be necessary first steps toward larger goals.

Other differences resulted from personal contact with leader aides. Aspirations for children seemed to be higher for the treatment group than for the control group. A significant difference in these aspirations was observed between families who had few contacts with the aides and those who had several. While not a great deal can be concluded from this study, it does suggest that more effort should be made to measure whether or not behavior changes

occur as a result of particular methods of family-life education. We may be able to do more with specific evaluations. Meanwhile, we depend primarily on personal responses, requests for more help, and other intangible and admittedly subjective means of evaluation.

#### THE FUTURE

To move forward in these new directions, staff members are challenged to keep up with both subject-matter developments and methods innovations. Toward this end, state specialists in more and more states are given university appointments and work closely with residence personnel in both teaching and research. County staff members are continually obtaining in-service training. In Missouri, extension education administrators estimate that half of their home economists and youth agents have taken additional work in residence on campus since being hired.

We in Extension are aware that we live in a changing world. Moving into the future, we must continually ask ourselves such questions as these:

How do we keep professionally abreast of new knowledge?

How can we relate to people in all levels of our pluralistic society?

In using mass media, how can we make individuals in the audience feel reached as persons?

Can we find ways to utilize the benefits of both mass media and small-group programs—possibly through new uses of Extension-trained nonprofessionals?

To answer these questions presents a challenge. We feel that Extension is equipped to meet this challenge and that the staff in the states and in the counties are accepting the opportunities provided by these new thrusts in family-life education.

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FOR THE SELF-RENEWING MAN the development of his own potentialities and the process of self-discovery never end. It is sad but unarguable fact that most human beings go through life only partially aware of the full range of their abilities. In our own society we could do much more than we now do to encourage self-development. We could, for example, drop the silly fiction that education is for youngsters, and devise many more arrangements for lifelong learning.

—JOHN W. GARDNER