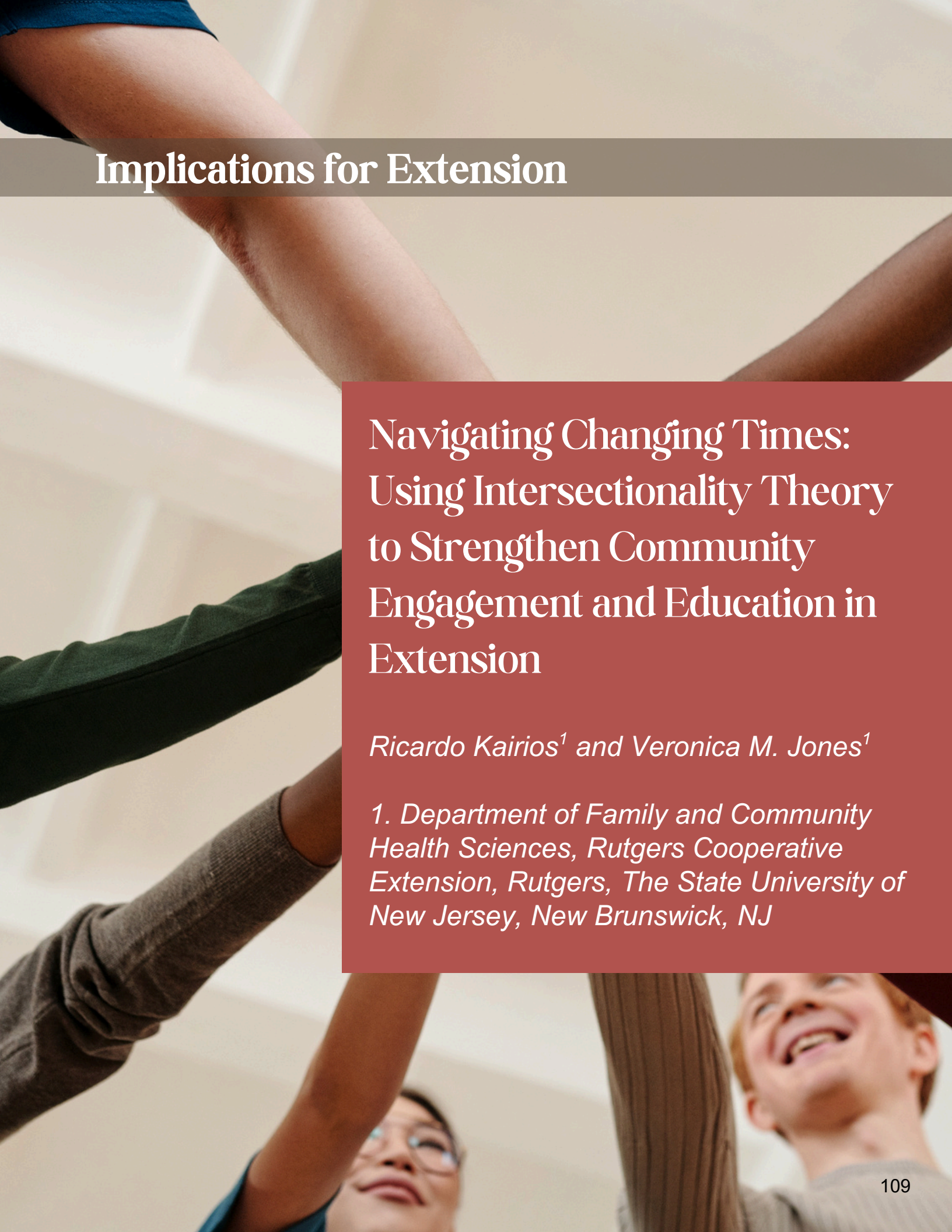

Navigating Changing Times: Using Intersectionality Theory to Strengthen Community Engagement and Education in Extension

Ricardo Kairios[1] and Veronica M. Jones[1]

1. Department of Family and Community Health Sciences, Rutgers Cooperative Extension, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, New Brunswick, NJ

Abstract

Community engagement and education within Cooperative Extension programs must address the diverse and intersecting identities of individuals and communities to ensure equitable access and meaningful impact. Intersectionality theory provides a framework for understanding how overlapping social identities – such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation – shape experiences and access to resources. This article discusses the implications of intersectionality for Family and Consumer Sciences professionals and highlights strategies to design culturally responsive programming that meets the needs of diverse communities. Integrating intersectionality into outreach and education efforts can help Extension professionals foster more inclusive programs that support individuals and communities.

Introduction

Part of the National Extension Association of Family and Consumer Sciences creed states, “willingness to accept the challenges of the changing times.” As times change and challenge our work, the need for Cooperative Extension programs to serve diverse populations remains essential. Traditional outreach models, which often adopt a one-size-fits-all approach, frequently overlook the complex ways in which individual experiences impact community engagement. Intersectionality theory, first introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), provides a lens to examine how overlapping systems of oppression – such as racism, sexism, and economic inequality – affect individuals’ access to education, resources, and equitable programs and services (Crenshaw, 1989).

In the context of Extension work, applying an intersectional approach allows professionals to tailor their programs to better address the unique needs of historically marginalized communities. This article explores how intersectionality theory can enhance Cooperative Extension’s Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) initiatives. By integrating this framework, Extension professionals can design programs that more effectively engage underrepresented populations, particularly in areas such as food security, financial literacy, health education, and community leadership.

Objective

This article aims to examine the relevance of intersectionality theory in Extension education and community engagement, highlight strategies for incorporating intersectional perspectives into Extension programming, and discuss the benefits and challenges of applying this framework to FCS initiatives.

Background

Health Equity in Cooperative Extension

In 2021, the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy Health Innovation Task Force published the *Cooperative Extension's National Framework for Health Equity and Well-Being* (Burton et al., 2021). The framework uses a social-ecological model to show how norms, policies, practices, and structural inequities influence health outcomes. It emphasizes the importance of considering diverse influences on health, including social identity factors such as race and gender identity, which are often shaped in society by systemic racism and cisphobia.

Focusing on health equity, social determinants of health, and coalitions as a community asset, the framework guides Extension professionals and the communities they serve. Full integration presents challenges, as Extension systems are complex and require tailored approaches to meet both community needs and job requirements (Charbonneau et al., 2025). Therefore, it is essential for Extension professionals to understand how social identities develop, how power differences create inequities, and how multiple forms of oppression compound challenges for marginalized groups.

Social Identity Development and Marginalization

Social identity development is the process by which individuals identify with specific social groups (Orenstein & Lewis, 2022). This typically begins in adolescence and can have lasting effects. Identities encompass a range of categories, including race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, immigration status, and age, as well as lifestyle roles like being an exerciser, smoker, drinker, reader, or hiker. The process is dynamic, shaped by both individual and societal factors, and includes two phases: identity confusion and identity synthesis. Identity confusion represents a period of uncertainty regarding identity with a specific social group, while identity synthesis reflects confidence in one's identity (Orenstein & Lewis, 2022). A meta-analysis by Potterton et al. (2022) found that adolescents experiencing identity confusion are more at risk for social-emotional disorders in adulthood. When identities are not affirmed or are stigmatized, negative psychological and health outcomes can result, especially during adolescence and emerging adulthood (Potterton et al., 2022).

Social identity development is not only shaped by individual values but is also continuously influenced by the broader societal context, including societal and institutional norms. This process can create inequities through the societal valuation of certain identities over others, affecting how individuals experience discrimination, marginalization, and support within their communities (Shen & Dumani, 2013). As FCS educators work to support health equity, understanding the intersections between different social identities (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation) and how these intersecting identities affect an individual's experience in society is critical. Marginalized groups often face multiple layers of oppression that compound their challenges, creating unique barriers to health access, education, and participation (Shen & Dumani, 2013). By integrating an understanding of these social dynamics into their work, Extension professionals can better address the needs of diverse communities through tailored interventions that account for the complex, intersectional nature of identity and oppression.

Intersectionality Theory and Its Relevance to Extension

Intersectionality recognizes that individuals navigate life through overlapping identities, which can expose them to both discrimination and privilege. This process creates a hierarchy that values some identities more favorably than others, what can be characterized as bias. Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality in 1989 to describe how Black women experience both racial and gender bias (Crenshaw, 1989). In the 1976 *DeGraffenreid vs. General Motors* case, Black women sued for discrimination, but the court dismissed the case because it failed to recognize the intersection of race and gender (Crenshaw, 1989). Although the company hired white women and black men, the unique experiences of Black women were overlooked. Today, intersectionality includes a broader range of identities, such as mental health, ability, nationality, religion, and gender identity, among many additional facets of identity.

Reaching diverse audiences is not new to Extension. Since the early 1900s, Extension has adapted to changing population shifts and needs. However, challenges persist, including limited staff diversity, underrepresentation of target populations, and insufficient funding for culturally tailored programs (Diaz et al., 2024). Community engagement is essential to assess program impact (Franz, 2014). Traditional models often rely on one-size-fits-all approaches that may not meet the needs of diverse communities. These challenges include limited representation in program development; outreach strategies that miss underserved populations, and educational materials that do not reflect cultural realities or identities.

Findings

When designing and delivering programs, Cooperative Extension follows a program planning model (Franz et al., 2015). This model includes phases such as identifying need-based issues, designing program plans based on those needs, delivering science-based education, and evaluating the program's impact. For example, Palmer and

Cromwell's (2019) Six Essential Elements Model provides an adaptable framework for educational programs (Palmer & Cromwell, 2019). The core elements of this model can be enhanced by applying an intersectionality lens, in alignment with the health equity and well-being framework.

Key Takeaways for Extension Professionals

1. Comprehensive Needs Assessment and Culturally Responsive Program Development

FCS educators should integrate intersectionality into program design by understanding the unique demographics and needs of the community. This involves using needs assessment data that reflects intersectional identities – disaggregated race, gender, sexual orientation, disability status, age, income level, and additional relevant factors – to inform program development. Data can be gathered through surveys, focus groups, and key informant interviews.

To put these ideas into practice, educators can engage in professional development opportunities focused on equity and inclusion, review existing curricula for cultural responsiveness, and co-create programs with underserved communities to ensure relevance. For example, Hughes et al. (2022) provides guidance on updating demographic questions in surveys to ensure they are inclusive and reflective of diverse, intersectional identities, thereby helping researchers gather more accurate data on participants' experiences and identities (Hughes et al., 2022). Involving community stakeholders throughout the process ensures their lived experiences are represented (Burton et al., 2021), and partnering with local organizations serving historically marginalized populations can support culturally tailored outreach strategies. To evaluate the effectiveness of inclusive needs assessments, educators can track metrics such as the diversity of survey respondents, the representation of intersectional identities in data, and the extent to which community-identified needs are reflected in program design.

2.Inclusive Outreach and Engagement Strategies

Extension professionals should form alliances with trusted community leaders to bridge connections with underserved groups. This not only enhances engagement but builds trust. These relationships can support the development and use of multilingual and culturally appropriate communication tools.

To put these strategies into practice, educators can co-host events with community partners, conduct outreach in familiar and accessible community spaces, and offer materials in multiple languages. Inclusive engagement also means offering flexible participation options – such as virtual learning, evening sessions, or childcare support – to reduce barriers. Research by Vines (2018) suggests that an engaged model for program delivery may be best suited for Extension programs, as it incorporates community input throughout the process. This model improves learning outcomes, fosters stronger partnerships, builds social networks, and supports sustainable solutions. Impact can be measured through participation rates across demographic groups, feedback from community partners, and pre/post assessments of trust and satisfaction with Extension services.

3.Addressing Structural Barriers

Many underserved communities face structural barriers to education and resources. Extension can help address these by advocating for policy changes that improve access to healthy food, financial services, and educational resources. As outlined in the *Cooperative Extension's National Framework for Health Equity and Well-Being,* leveraging community coalitions is an asset to Extension professionals (Burton et al., 2021). To implement these ideas, Extension educators can participate in local advocacy efforts, collaborate with coalitions to identify policy priorities, and develop programs that directly respond to community-identified needs. For example, offering workforce development programs tailored to populations facing multiple disadvantages or creating leadership initiatives that empower underrepresented individuals to take on decision-making roles.

To evaluate the impact of these interventions, educators can track indicators such as the number of community members accessing new or improved services, policy changes influenced by Extension efforts, increases in leadership roles held by program participants from marginalized backgrounds,

and pre- and post-program assessments measuring changes in knowledge, confidence, or access to resources. Tools such as logic models, community-based participatory evaluation frameworks, and equity dashboards can support this process by helping educators monitor progress, ensure accountability, and improve program effectiveness.

Effectively supporting intersectionality-focused initiatives also requires intentional resource allocation. This includes budgeting for translation services, compensating community partners for their time and expertise, and investing in staff training on equity and inclusion. Grant-writing support and internal funding mechanisms can be leveraged to prioritize programs that address systemic inequities. Transparent resource tracking and community input on funding priorities can further ensure equitable distribution and alignment with community needs. As Extension educators navigate changing times, community partnerships are essential for maximizing resources and addressing inequities. Strengthening Extension's role in this space requires both strategic collaboration and intentional resource development.

4.Personal Reflection

It is important to take time to self-reflect on your individual knowledge and awareness around intersectionality. Questions such as "What are the historical and cultural characteristics of the populations I serve?", "Who is included or left out of programming?" or "How might my own biases reflect in the work I do?" can guide this process (Sabik, 2021). To further support this practice, educators can engage in ongoing professional learning, participate in peer reflection groups, or use tools like the Implicit Association Test (Greenwald et al., 2025), the Intersectionality Toolbox (Sabik, 2021), or learn from previously available trainings like *Coming Together* (Walcott et al., 2020). The Extension network also offers opportunities to learn from colleagues, share insights, and adapt inclusive resources. Personal reflection is not a one-time activity – it is a continuous process that deepens understanding and strengthens the ability to serve diverse communities effectively.

Summary

Integrating intersectionality theory into Extension education and community engagement enhances the ability to effectively serve diverse populations. By recognizing the interconnected challenges individuals face, Extension professionals can design more inclusive, equitable, and impactful programs. This article outlines key strategies for applying intersectionality into practice, including inclusive needs assessments, culturally responsive outreach, and addressing structural barriers through advocacy and intentional resource development. It emphasizes the importance of professional development, curriculum review, and co-creation with historically marginalized communities to ensure programming is relevant, sustainable, and community-driven. These approaches strengthen Extension's commitment to equity and inclusion, ensuring that all communities benefit from educational and outreach efforts.

While this article offers actionable strategies for integrating intersectionality into Extension programming, future research is needed to deepen understanding and expand on the evidence-base literature. Studies could explore the long-term impacts of intersectionality-informed approaches on community outcomes, examine how co-creation models influence program sustainability, trust-building, participant empowerment, and identify adaptable best practices across diverse geographic and cultural contexts. These areas of inquiry would not only strengthen the theoretical foundation but also guide more effective, equity-driven Extension practices. As programming continues to evolve, embracing intersectionality offers a pathway toward more responsive, inclusive, and impactful community engagement.

Author Information

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Ricardo Kairios, Department of Family and Community Health Sciences, Rutgers Cooperative Extension, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 1140 Parkside Ave, Ewing, NJ 08638m; 609-989-6830. Ricardo.Kairios@Rutgers.edu.

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