Strong Black Marriages: Love Is A House, You’ve Got The Key

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“Sometimes, when we’re lying together, I look at her and I feel dizzy with the realization that here is another distinct person from me, who has memories, origins, thoughts, feelings that are different from my own……..
That tension between familiarity and mystery meshes something strong between us. Even if one builds a life together based on trust, attentiveness and mutual support, I think that it’s important that a partner continues to surprise.”

Lani Guinier on the Obama Effect on Marriages

“She [Michelle] and her husband [Barack] embody a very healthy relationship. That in itself is quite a public and political statement.”

The Problem

♦ When compared with Whites (62%) and Hispanics (60%), the marriage rate among Blacks is the lowest (41%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002).

♦ A single-parent family has a higher likelihood of being poor (McLanahan & Booth, 1989).

♦ Never-married mothers have higher rates of unemployment & less likely than divorced or separated mothers to have completed high school (McLanahan & Casper, 1995).
Why It Is Important To Examine Strong Black Marriages

♦ Most Blacks desire to be married (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995).

♦ Most Blacks desire a strong marriage (Glenn, 1990; Kidder, 1988).

♦ Beneficial to the couple (Salari & Baldwin, 2002).

The Current Study

- Qualitative Study
- Strengths-Based Study
- Investigated the characteristics of strong Black marriages
Significance of Current Study

♦ Very little empirical research has examined strong Black marriages
Research Question

♦ What do Black couples who have strong marriages say about what makes their marriages work?
Method - Participants

- 39 Black couples who had strong marriages (self-defined)
- Had to have at least one child
- From the southern region of Louisiana
- Recruited by a university community expert
- 30 Open-Ended Questions
Sample Interview Questions

♦ “How would you describe a strong marriage? What is essential for a strong marriage?”

♦ “Do you know other Black couples who have a strong marriage? What do you believe makes their marriages strong?”

♦ “Do you know other Black couples who are having difficulties in their marriage? What do you believe has caused these couples to have difficulties in their marriage?”
Sample Interview Questions

♦ “How did you learn about what it takes to have a strong marriage? Did your parents, or other individuals, give you any advice regarding marriage? If so, what advice did they give? What advice really stuck in your mind?”

♦ “How would you define family?”
Sample Interview Questions

♦ “What is more important, your immediate family, your extended family, or your marriage? Please explain.”

♦ “Has the church or religion played a role in your marriage? Please explain.”
Method - Participants

- Interviewed at a location of their choosing – usually in their homes

- Interviews were recorded and transcribed, resulting in approximately 1,400 pages of single-spaced data

- Demographic information was collected before the interview began
Method - Participants

- **Mean Age**: 55-59 years of age (husbands & wives)
- **Mean Education**: Community College Degree (husbands & wives)
- **Mean Household Income**: $70,000 - $79,999
- **Mean Length of Marriage**: 31 years
Method - Procedure

The Initial Explanatory Telephone Call

♦ Informed of interview procedures

♦ Restaurant certificate as provided as compensation to thank couples for their time

♦ Prior to participation, written consent form & demographics questionnaire completed by the couples
Methods - Interview Protocol

- Builds on previous work conducted by both researchers related to strong marriages
Results

- Theme 1: Communication
- Theme 2: God/Church/Prayer
- Theme 3: Commitment
- Theme 4: Respect
Communication (Narrative 1)

- F: I think it’s an ability to understand that you’re different. You’re gonna do things different, you’re gonna say things different, think different, but when, if you understand that and you understand how to communicate those differences, it builds a strong relationship because it is the relationship that builds a strong marriage. So, you know, it’s talking, it’s laughing, it’s being able to be transparent and cry. It’s letting your flaws just be right there. You know, hey, this is who I am. The good, the bad, the ugly, the fat, the skinny, you know, this is what it is. And being able to say, that’s what I love.
Communication (Narrative 2)

- How do you make decisions in your marriage?

- M: We talk about it. We talk about, I talk about everything. Like I said, I’m a talker. I like to discuss, I discuss everything. Even stuff that gets me in trouble, I discuss it. Now, you know, baby, this other woman told me today that I have some good (?) and it was very—[makes a buzzer sound]. Already goin’ downhill right there, but I’m just that kind of person. I’m like the, I tell everything. And we talk about it, and then we try to come to some understanding.
Now if she feels really, really strong about it sometimes I say, okay, fine, whatever. Sometimes I’ll say, well, that’s not how we gonna do it, or that is how we gonna do it, and you know, that’s pretty much it. But after it’s all said and done, if she’s that bent about it, I just go ahead and do it, you know, and no big deal.
Communication (Narrative 3)

♦ Who would you go to if you had a problems in your marriage?

♦ F: I would go to him. I would go to him and I would be straight up with him if there’s something not right. And he does the same. He comes to me and he’ll tell me, you know, you’ve been working every night ‘til 8—
Communication (Narrative 4)

♦ How would you describe a strong marriage?

♦ F: I think some of the usual clichés but they work. They work! You have to communicate, because nobody is a mind reader. You have to voice what you want, and when things are not to your liking, you have to say it. And my husband—my maiden name is Blunt. But my husband says, “Your name’s not Blunt for nothin’!” So I tell him what I think and I don’t mind saying it, you know.
How would you describe a strong marriage?

F: A strong marriage is being able to communicate with each other, laughing through good times and bad times, you know, and not just, you know, to up build each other, you know, constantly no matter what you go through. Because no matter what, you never get to know a person ever, so you always learn each other and just to be there for support and to help each other through thick and thin no matter what.
Communication (Narrative 5, cont.)

- Now, I’m not saying—because I know that there are people who get married to the wrong person who do need to get divorced. I’m not one of these Pollyanna’s who says, you know, if you get married you gotta get married for good. But I think if you put a lot of thought into it at the beginning, then, and you’re friends, I mean, we are genuinely very good friends. And our friendship developed, you know, even though that night I kind of knew. But you know, we dated for a long time, and premarital sex was something that I didn't believe in, and I’m not saying that we were virgins when we got married, but there were years and years, I shouldn’t say—but years that we dated and became good friends before there was ever any kind of an intimate association. And I think you’ve got to be able to develop that bond and that commitment to the other person.
How would you describe a strong marriage?

M: A strong marriage is one where there is good communications, where the communications is done from an I perspective and not a you perspective.
How would you describe a strong marriage?

F: I think a strong marriage is when you first of all love God and his principles. If that comes first, then no matter what happens between you and your mate, you have a higher person to answer to. So when I get angry with my husband, I still have to remember, now how does Jehovah say I should handle this? So for me, that's critical in a good marriage.
God/Church/Prayer (Narrative 1, cont.)

- You need someone stronger than just the two of you. And I say that because there are men who love their wives who are unfaithful. There are women who love their husband who become workaholics. Because all they have is answering to each other. But when you answer to someone higher than that, then you have to go by their guiding principle. So for me that's the strongest thing to make a marriage work.
God/Church/Prayer (Narrative 2)

♦ Do you know other Black couples who have a strong marriages? And are they what you just described, or do you see other things?

♦ M: I know a few. I know a few of them, and I know that one of the core things of it is God. The religion. The relationship with Jesus Christ. I know that's the core thing. That has become the core thing for us, and the ones that I know whose marriage is successful, the core thing is a relationship with God. And I say that not knowing what your religion is or what anybody else's religion is—
God/Church/Prayer (Narrative 3)

♦ Has the church or religion or God played a role in your marriage?

♦ F: Huge. Absolutely huge, yeah. In fact, you know, you could probably consider this as a union of three. The two of us and Jesus Christ. And I think that what that does is it gives you a perspective and it gives you a set of values that really kind of surround what the relationship is, so absolutely.
I: Keeping God in your marriage.

F: First and foremost, always, because He (God) sets the rules and standards for us to have a good marriage. And if we go by those standards that he set in the Bible for us, then you’ll prosper.
God/Church/Prayer (Narrative 5)

How would you describe a strong marriage?

M: You have to have certain things in common, you know. One thing, you have to try to establish a strong spiritual, I guess, relationship or bond, and we’ve had that since day one. You know, both of us, we have been very, very actively involved in the church. And like I say, the same thing applied from the time our sons were born up until they left we always tried to get them actively involved in the church and expose them to a lot of things that was enriching to their development, you know?
God/Church/Prayer (Narrative 6)

♦ As you know, black couples, all kinds of couples are having struggles in marriages these days. What would you suggest as a way to help other couples?

♦ M: Well, the Bible principles are what we use. There’s one in particular that says, “Keep self out of sight.” And the marriages that I’ve seen that have fallen apart are because self was the first think in their eyes, and they look in the mirror as if what they saw in the mirror was it. But when you put yourself secondary and that’s how you feel in your heart, then you’ll do whatever it takes to keep your marriage together, especially if you’re concerned about the marriage. Because you’ll know, okay, I’m not interested in me because I know—even if you grew up with a person you still gonna have different personalities.
And at that point you have to be able to say, “Okay, now, if I’m gonna marry this person and I’ve made these vows before man and God and God and man and all that, I gotta, the vow means something. I gotta live up to the vow.” And at that point you have to say to yourself, “Well, that being the case, then whatever it takes to make that person happy is what I’m gonna do.” And that’s not contingent on whether that person reacts toward me the same way. I’m gonna do what I know to be peaceful, and then hopefully the other person will do the same think toward me. But even if it’s not, the other scriptural principle I’m thinking about is, as far as it depends upon you, be peaceable with everybody.
Commitment (Narrative 1)

♦ How did you learn how to have a strong marriage?

♦ M: Just decided to do it. You just have to decide that I’m gonna work this out. This is important enough that I’m not gonna let it go. And you keep tweaking it, tweaking it, until you find a comfort level that works for you that manages to work for your spouse. Sometimes you talk about it, sometimes you don’t. Sometimes you just have to work it out. When you grit your teeth, you get angry, you be saying, “I’m gonna git her when I get home!” You have to get home and say, “I ain’t gonna git her today.”
Commitment (Narrative 2)

How would you describe a strong marriage?

M: Giving the woman everything she wants. Nah, (laughing)! No, uh, you know, I think the definition of a strong marriage is knowing how to work through the things that you get into. We've had some situations to where it called for me to be strong, and then some situations where it called for her to be strong, and when she was down I was up and when she was up I was down. And there was times that we both was down, that we just basically leaned on each other to stand up.
Commitment (Narrative 2, cont.)

♦ The definition—I don't know. It's just being there. It's just realizing that, you know, when I'm in this I'm in this to win it, I'm in this, it's not just about me, it's about her. I believe we can make it together, and it's just saying, okay, I'm going to deal with it. There are some things that's gonna come my way, I got some challenges, I got some issues, but we've decided to work it out together. So the definition of a strong marriage is just, what makes a strong marriage is just being willing to face anything together. That's—I got your back, you got my back. That's pretty much what makes it strong. As long as we for each other, nothing else can come between us.
Commitment (Narrative 3)

♦ How would you describe a strong marriage?

♦ You’re in it for the long haul. I think that’s the other thing. You recognize that, you know, we’re partners for life and so whatever comes up we’re gonna figure out a way to resolve this, and it’s not an option that we’re gonna, I’m gonna go off and do something else. I think also commitment to the individual so that it’s not, you know, I think it’s normal that you’re gonna be attracted to other people, but the commitment is a decision. It’s not a whim, well, maybe I should go out and explore this, that, and the other. But, so, being faithful to your mate and recognizing that this the person that, I mean, there’s a reason that you got married to this person, and you may go through periods where it’s like, what have I done? But just having faith in your initial decision and knowing that this is the person for you.
Respect (Narrative 1)

❖ How would you describe a strong marriage?

❖ F: Okay, I think a strong marriage is one where the two parties come together and they are strong individuals in their own right, and they come together and they have something to contribute to a union. And they have, share similar values, similar goals, similar ideas, and can have discussions where they don’t have to agree on everything, but the respect has to be there. So both parties respect each others’ values, respect who the other person is as an individual.
Respect (Narrative 1, cont.)

- And recognize that I’ve learned a lot from my husband, because I think I was a lot more immature than he. He seems to always have been just really mature about so many things. But recognizing that you’re gonna have differences, you’re gonna have disagreements, but I remember he used to always say to me, “If it’s not gonna marry 20 years from now, then what are we talking about now?” And recognizing that it’s about the big picture.
Respect (Narrative 2)

♦ How would you describe a strong marriage?

♦ F: To me a strong marriage there is give and take on both sides. And I had to learn that because I was more of a pushy type. But I have learned over the years to be more patient and I guess a little passive than normal for me. But to keep down confusion, I don’t like confusion, so whatever it takes, you know, to make, as long as I’m being treated, like I said, with respect and love. I can back down a little bit.
Respect (Narrative 3)

- How would you describe a strong marriage?
  - M: I would describe a strong marriage by the fact that two people were willing to—well, first of all, the foundation had to be two people willing to allow the other individual to be themselves. And not—a lot of times we put up a façade for the general public, but allow the individual to be themselves and be comfortable while they’re vulnerable, you see what I mean?
Respect (Narrative 4)

I feel that two individuals need to understand each other, okay? Maybe not completely—I don’t think we can ever understand each other completely, but understand each other to the point where they recognize certain things, you know, like, oh well, you know, he’s getting angry, these are his hot buttons. These are her hot buttons. That type of thing. And they really—and understanding of that nature, you see what I mean? They must allow each other to be individuals, you see what I mean? Support each other in aspirations, the things that they want to do...be willing to make sacrifices for each other. Things of that nature, right.
What Causes Difficulties in Black Marriages

- Infidelity
- Money
Well, what kinds of things would cause, not dissolve it, but really cause you problems in keeping that marriage strong? If one or the other of them did something.

F: I would think the usual thing is infidelity would be one. I mean, that would be certainly an issue that would be, we would definitely have to, that would cause pause. We would have to really talk out that and deal with that. We would have to stop and definitely have a third party to help us with that.
Infidelity (Narrative 2)

- What kinds of things have or could cause you difficulties in your marriage?

- F: I think if he was not totally open and honest with me or—about anything. Even if it’s another woman. I have always said to him, if you feel that you no longer want the marriage, let me know. I don’t want to have to hear it from somebody else. That’s about it.
Money (Narrative 1)

- So when couples that you know have difficulties in their marriage, what's usually going on? Or what's typically the problem?

- M: Finances. Finances or sex. That's usually the issues. Finances or sex, it's either you ain't getting of one or you ain't getting enough of the other! That's pretty much it!
Money (Narrative 2)

- When couples have difficulties in their marriages, as you look around, what usually causes it?

- M: I think the biggest thing is money. Probably the second biggest thing is other people, be they differences in friends, I want to say differences in friends, they run in different kinds of element, or money differences in element, and probably, and I think the biggest thing is somebody else comes in their life. Which happens. You know, they meet somebody else and the one or the other becomes unfaithful, or the other one gets jealous. And those are mutually exclusive, because you can be jealous and nothing’s going on.
Summary of Interview Responses
– Strong Black Marriages

♦ **Communication** is an important component of strong Black marriages.

♦ **God, Church, and Prayer** are mutually-dependent components of strong Black marriages.

♦ **Commitment** is the glue that keeps couples together when one or both of them want to end the marriage.

♦ **Mutual Respect** allows couples to be themselves and support their spouses.
Thank You For Your Attention!