What We Know And Don’t Know: The State of Research on African American Marriages and Relationships

Cassandra D. Chaney, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Louisiana State University
Administration for Children and Families
AAHMI

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My Research

- Relationship Dynamics of Married and Cohabiting Black Couples (with and without children)

- Have conducted over 100 face-to-face individual and collective interviews with Black couples

- Qualitative and Quantitative
What We Know

- When compared with Whites (62%) and Hispanics (60%), African-Americans are least likely to marry (41%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003), most likely to divorce, and most likely to end their relationship upon initial cohabitation to become a single-parent (Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005; Scott, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006; Smock & Gupta, 2002; Smock & Manning, 2004; Taylor, Jackson, & Chatters, 1997).
What We Know

• Single-parent families have a higher likelihood of being poor (McLanahan & Booth, 1989).

• Never-married mothers have higher rates of unemployment & are less likely than divorced or separated mothers to have completed high school (McLanahan & Casper, 1995).

• Never-married fathers have a slightly higher poverty rate (23.4% in 1995) than Whites (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1996).
What We Know

- Black children who live with one parent are less likely to be in school at the age of 17 and are less likely to graduate from high school (McLanahan, 1985).

- Children of Black single mothers are at a higher risk of establishing a single parent household by the age of 16 than daughters of two-parent Black households (McLanahan, 1988).
What We Know

- Black children of single parents have higher rates of teenage and single motherhood, lower levels of educational attainment, and lower rates of labor force participation (McLanahan & Casper, 1995).

- Black daughters who spent even part of their childhood in a single-parent family because of parental marital disruption or because their parent never married are 36% more likely to have a teenage birth, 52% more likely to have a premarital birth, and 32% more likely to experience marital disruption (McLanahan & Bumpass, 1988).
What We Do Not Know

- Characteristics of Strong, Black Marriages (Strengths-Perspective)
- Definition & Demonstration of Love
- Romantic Entry among Black Adolescents
- Inter-racial Dating among Black Teens
What We Do Not Know

• Inter-generational Messages regarding Relationships and Marriage

• Relationship Expectations (before & after marriage)

• Pre-Marital Preparations
What We Do Not Know

- Relationship Dynamics of Long-Term Cohabiting Black Couples
- Pre and Post-Marital Professional Counseling among Black Couples
- Relationship Rebuilding after Marital Infidelity
What We Do Not Know

- The Relationship Dynamics of Gay Black Men
- The Relationship Dynamics of Gay Black Women
- Romantic Choices of Single Blacks
Strong Black Marriages (Strengths Perspective)

- Qualitative Study; 30 Black Couples; (1) Challenges in African-American Marriages, (2) Overcoming External Challenges to Marriage, (3) Resolving Intra-marital Conflict, and (4) Unity and the Importance of Being “Equally Yoked.” (Hopkins-Williams, 2009)

- Qualitative Study; 39 Black Couples, (1) Communication; (2) God/Church/Prayer; (3) Commitment; (4) Respect (Chaney & Skogrand)
The Definition and Demonstration of Love/Romantic Attachment Among African Americans

- Romantic love and adult attachment (secure, avoidant, & anxious/ambivalent) (John Bowlby & Mary Ainsworth)

- Compared with adults with an insecure attachment style, persons with a secure attachment style described their family of origin and their current family more positively and scored higher on personality variables indicative of self-confidence, psychological well-being, and functioning in the social world (Dielm, Eunicka & Bourbeau, 1998)
What Is Love?

M: “Love was liking her. You know, getting nervous when I get around her. Getting excited when I saw her.”
What Is Love?

• In your opinion, what are the reasons for getting married? Why did you get married?

• M: “Well, strangely enough I was probably in love with her. And I was just ready to get married. I thought it’d work out, things looked good, I was happy, she was happy.”

• And you said you were in love with her. What does that mean?

• M: “Love’s passion and companionship.”
What Is Love?

M: "Well, love is knowing, well first I'm gonna say what I seen written one time and believe in. Love is knowing everything about the person and still loving them. And explaining how I feel about that is you realize that, you first realize that you're all different. You realize you got some things about you that I just can't stand, but then I got some things about me that you can't stand, and yet you still in my corner, and I'm in your corner. And regardless of what, we got each other's back."
What Is Love?

• “It's not me agreeing with everything you say, it's not you agreeing with everything I say, but it's arguing sometimes but knowing how to make up. It's saying no and knowing how to receive that getting a no. So it's give and take, it's diversity, it's, you know, it's a lot of different things, but I guess it sums up into love is, to me what love is, is understanding. It's no mystical thing, it's understanding. It's being understanding, knowing how to relate. That's what love is to me.”
What Is Love?

• In your opinion, and based on your experience getting married, what are the reasons for getting married?

• F: “I think for me some of the reasons to get married... I believe you have to really—that word love comes up again—you have to really love the individual. And when I say love I mean accepting the difference in the person that’s there. Accepting the person for whom God made the person to be. Because when two couples get together, I don’t care how much you say “I love you” there’s gonna be some conflict because the personalities are gonna be different. So you have to accept that person without saying, “I wanna change that individual.”
What Is Love?

"A lot of times couples get married and they be like, “Well, I want that person to change.” But once you learn to accept that person and to see the things that God has placed inside of the person, it makes a difference, you know. And for my relationship with my husband I think, when he met me I think he saw in me what God wanted me to become. It was a lot of difference because we’re like night and day as far as personalities and stuff, but I think that’s what makes the relationship a whole lot stronger, too. I don’t know if I answered your question.”"
Romantic Entry among Black Adolescents

- How does the quality of the parent-child relationship influence adolescents romantic choices? (Steinberg, 2001)
Inter-racial Romance and Marriage

- Rates are higher in the West
- Tend to be younger
- Married before
- More distant in age from their spouses (both younger and older)
Intergenerational Messages Regarding Black Relationships & Marriage

- Qualitative Study conducted with Inner-City Black Adolescent Mothers

- (1) Parental Replacement; (2) Parent Supplement; (3) Supported Primary Parent; and (4) Parental Apprentice (Apfel & Seitz, 1991)
Intergenerational Messages Regarding Black Relationships & Marriage

- Positive and negative sexual messages are communicated by parents to their children, both verbally and nonverbally.

(Darling & Hicks, 1982)
Intergenerational Messages Regarding Black Relationships & Marriage

- Children of divorce had elevated rates of cohabitation as adults, relative to marriage.

- Those whose parents cohabited following divorce exhibited elevated odds of cohabiting themselves, compared to young adults whose parents remarried without first cohabiting or remained in stable marriages (Sassler, Cunningham, & Lichter, 2009).
Relationship/Marital Expectations

- Qualitative Study
- The majority of unmarried women, including disadvantaged single and cohabiting mothers, value marriage as a personal goal (Lichter, Batson & Brown, 2004)
Pre-Marital Expectations

- Responses of members of the class of 1980.
- 70% of young adults expected to move out of their parents home before marriage (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1987).
Marital Expectations

- Compared to adolescents from other race/ethnic backgrounds, White adolescents are more likely to date and are especially more likely than Black adolescents to participate in serious romantic relationships that increase marital expectations (Crissey, 2005).
Pre-Marital Preparations

- Provide premarital, marriage counseling and mediation services

- Change TANF eligibility rules to provide incentives for single parents to marry or for two-parent families to stay together

- Encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families (married or unmarried) by using TANF to funds services—such as job placement and training for non-custodial parents—designed to promote responsible fatherhood and increase the capacity of fathers to provide emotional and financial support for their children (Ooms, 2002)
Long-Term Black Cohabiting Couples

- 2.2 million children (3.5%) reside in cohabiting-couple families

- Approximately 1 in 7 children in unmarried-parent families also live with their parent's unmarried partner.

- A cohabiting partner's economic contribution results in a 29% reduction in the proportion of children in cohabiting-couple families living in poverty, but still they fare poorly in comparison with children in married-couple families. (Manning & Lichter, 1996).
Pre and Post-Marital Professional Counseling among Black Couples

- Cultural groups vary in how they define, respond to and seek help for problems

(McGoldrick, Giordano, & Garcia-Preto, 2005)
Data from the National Survey of Families and Households demonstrate that, among recently-divorced men and women, a substantial percentage had been romantically involved with someone other than their spouse prior to divorcing (South & Lloyd, 1995)
The Relationship Dynamics of Gay Black Men

- Qualitative study of characteristics of successful Black gay men, Wise (2001) revealed homosexual Black men are completely overlooked in dialogues regarding manhood because the word “success” implies “prosperity, wealth and position” (p. 4) and heterosexuality.
The Relationship Dynamics of Gay Black Women

- The Black Women’s Relationship Project: A National Survey of Black Lesbians
- Mays & Cochran (1988)
Most unmarried African Americans viewed singlehood as a necessary response to societal constraints, rather than as a choice (Staples, 1981).
Questions That Can Guide Future Research – RE: Strong Black Marriages (Strengths Perspective)

• How do opposite Black couples make their relationship work?

• How do they think their decision to marry and remain together over time effect their children, other family members, or the community?

• How do Black couples work at keeping their marriage strong?

• How do single, dating, cohabiting, married, adolescent and same-sex Black couples define and describe love?

• Does the definition and demonstration of love change over time? If so, how?

• How do the definitions provided compare and contrast with others within the Black community and between other racial/ethnic groups?

• What types of adult attachment styles facilitate relationship/marital stability among Blacks?

• To what degree does relationship stability, emotional closeness, and commitment determine when Black adolescents enter into romantic relationships?

• What makes a potential partner a good candidate to become a “Baby Momma” or “Baby Daddy?”
Questions That Can Guide Future Research – RE: Inter-racial Dating Among Black Teens

• What are the advantages and disadvantages of dating someone from a different racial/ethnic group?

• What influence, if any, does family and friends influence inter-racial dating behavior among Black teens?

• What specific type of person did Black parent/s want their children to become romantically involved with?

• What type of parental models did Black receive from their parents (e.g., quality)?

• What advice did Blacks receive from their parents regarding romantic involvement?
Questions That Can Guide Future Research – RE: Relationship Expectations

• What types of instrumental and expressive support do Black men and women in dating, cohabiting, and married relationships expect from one another?

• Are there differences in the types of support and heterosexual and homosexual couples expect from one another?

• In what ways, if any, do you think that marriage will improve your relationship?

• How do you think that your relationship will change after marriage?

• What specific changes, if any, do you expect from your partner after marriage?
Questions That Can Guide Future Research – RE: Long-Term Black Cohabitating Couples

- In what ways are the relationships of Black long-term cohabiting couples similar and dissimilar from those of long-term Black married couples?

• What factors motivate Black couples to seek professional counseling?

• What do Black couples think about the counseling profession?

• Are the relationships of openly Black gay men more or less stable than Black gay men who are still “in the closet?”

• What are the relationship dynamics of Black gay men in long-term relationships?

• Are the relationships of openly Black gay men more or less stable than Black gay men who are still “in the closet?”

• What are the relationship dynamics of Black gay men in long-term relationships?

- Are you currently in a romantic relationship?
- Would you like to be in a romantic relationship?
- What factors would motivate you to become romantically involved with someone?
- In your opinion, what is a “healthy” relationship?
- Would you like to get married one day?
- Do you expect to get married one day?
References


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Thank You For Your Attention!