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An Exploration of Factors Related to the Decline in Black Marriages

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Abstract

The institution of marriage is influenced by factors such as divorce, infidelity and financial strain. The fastest rate of decline in marriage rates is being experienced within the Black community (Lawson, 2000). In this study, Black is inclusive of those who racially self identify as Black, African American, or Bi-Racial (having one Black parent). The literature suggests the rate of Black marriage has been impacted by personal perceptions, sexual behavior, slavery, unequal sex ratio, socioeconomic conditions and stereotypes (Allen and Olson, 2001; Broman, 1993; Taylor, 1998). The purpose of this pilot study was to explore perceptions of marriage, as connected to various stereotypes and historical perspectives, utilizing survey responses from Black men at a Southeastern land grant university.

An Exploration of Factors Related to the Decline in Black Marriages

Patterns of marriage have changed significantly in recent decades (Besharov & West, 2002). The changes include older ages at first marriage, lower marriage rates and higher rates of divorce and separation (Kiecolt & Fossett, 1997). During the 1950's, the rate of marriage among Blacks was equivalent to Whites (Taylor, 1998). When Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his "I Have a Dream" speech, married couples headed more than 70% of all black families. In 2002, the number had declined to 48% (Kinnon, 2003). One of the factors influencing the decline in Black marriage rates has been the rising rate of incarceration among Black men at all educational levels over the past 30 years (Kiecolt & Fossett).

Stereotypes of marriage are another factor impacting Black males' perception of marriage. A stereotype can be defined as "a fixed way of thinking about people that put them into categories and does not allow for individual variation" (Franzoi, 2000, p. 114). Black men are often stereotyped as being irresponsible, abusive, lazy, exploitive, and incapable of marital commitment (Dickson, 1993; Kelly, 2001; Pinderhughes, 2002). Pinderhughes states "stereotypes of African American men play a powerful role in maintaining their status in the social system, and therefore play a part in the problems between men and women" (p. 274).

Taylor (1998) reports that slavery has imposed barriers on marriage and family formation for Blacks in America. State laws did not formerly acknowledge relationships between freed male and female slaves until 1865 as a result of the Freedman's Bureau. Slavery limited Black men in their role as father and/or husband. Black men were essentially eradicated from positions of power in the family and in the workplace (Staples as cited in Bethea, 1995). As a result of this eradication, Black women began to take on predominately male roles and were commonly

treated as equals, or in some cases, superior to men. In response, Bethea states that many Blacks today still see the influence of slavery and racism in their most intimate relationships.

A common theory used to discuss the decline in Black marriages is the Mate Availability Theory, which accredits the decline in marriage to an “imbalance in the ratio of available men and men, known technically as the sex ratio” (Taylor, 1998, p. 4). The sex ratio is defined as the calculation of the number of men per 100 women. Whenever there are more women than men, a low sex ratio is said to occur. On the other hand, when there is a surplus of men, a high sex ratio is the result. Bradley (2004) and Pinderhughes (2002) suggest that the ratio is 2 to 1, Black women to Black men. Others give estimates ranging from 4 to 1, to the largest of 6 to 1, when considering the multiple factors that declare a Black man to be a desirable partner (Bradley, 2004). The 2000 U.S. Census reports the ratio being 85 Black men for every 100 Black women.

The decreasing proportion of employed Black men to single women is thought to be the causal mechanism explaining recent increases in female-headed households as well as delayed or nonmarriage among Black Americans (James, 1998). Pinderhughes (2002) discusses the socioeconomic conditions that affect Black marriages, stating “African American men who have stable employment are twice as likely to marry as men who do not” (p.273). With regards to Black women and the economy, the increase in economic and social opportunities increases the motivation for women to forgo marriage (James; King, 1999). Fossett & Kiecolt (as cited in Taylor, 1998) indicate that the average socioeconomic status of women and the average number of women in the workforce were both negatively related to the prevalence of marriage for women and men.

According to the 2000 U.S. Census, over 3.7 million Black adults hold a four-year college degree or higher. The discouraging news is that there is a disparity between the

proportion of Black women to Black men who have four-year degrees, about 1.5 million to 1.1 million, and this gap is widening (The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education-Online, 2004). Furthermore, Black women hold 57% of all bachelor's degrees held by Blacks. The large disparity in degree attainment between Black men and women may lead to possible unequal economic opportunities for spouses, as there are chances for disharmony within Black marriages (The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education-Online, 2004). Staples (1982) reported men who attain the same educational background as their spouses marry at an earlier age but are associated with higher divorce rates. This theory is consistent to what Wilson (as cited in McNeal, 1998) suggested as the primary difference in the rates of marriage between Black and White couples.

Glick (1998) reported that 72% of Black between 20-29 years of age had never married (as cited in Dickson, 1993). A possible reason for the rise in the never-married statistic is the perceived negative relationship between Black males and females (Cazenave, 1983; Chapman, 1983; Dickson, 1993; Staples, 1981; Taylor, 1998; Zollar & Williams, 1987). As cited in Cazenave (1983; Bethea, 1995), numerous researchers indicate some hostility between Black males and females as a result of the male's perception that the Black woman has "too much control and power" in their families. Kinnon (2003) reports that some experts in the field believe Black men and women have different perceptions and expectations of marriage. [Some] Black women assume the marriage will be monogamous; [some] Black men don't attach as much significance to monogamy.

Researchers have indicated there are numerous societal factors bearing on the current state of Black marriage (Kinnon, 2003; Taylor, 1998). Some of those factors consist of drug problems in the Black community, high levels of incarceration, excessive rates of unemployment and the growing AIDS epidemic (Bethea, 1995; King, 1999; Kinnon, 2003). Allen & Olson

(2001) report that studies indicate that low desire to marry, rather than economical factor or sex ratio, is the major cause of low marital rates. Researchers identify strong peer group attachment, the importance of group membership, and the possible constriction of personal freedom upon marriage (Anderson, 1989, Hannerz, 1969 and Kitwana, 2002 as cited in South, 1993). Anderson (1989, as cited in South, 1993) states that Black males flee from marriage because of the possible detrimental power on their connections with peers.

Another aspect is with the low marriage rates for Black men. Young Black men will have few friends that are married. In 1940, 60% of Black men ages 20-23 years old were single, by the mid 1980's, 90% of Black men in this age group were single (Mare & Winship, 1991). A national survey conducted by Hatchett (as cited in King, 1999), revealed that 40 percent of Blacks who responded felt like they did not know if they wanted to be married. The reason was there were "so few good marriages" that were evident in their communities. Considering, if their friends are not married, they may be reluctant to marry. Studies have shown that discrediting stereotypes, in addition to institutional racism and economic marginality, has had an overwhelming effect on Black males' relationships with women (Kimberly, 2004; Lawson, 2000).

Pinderhughes (2002) states "stereotypes of African American men play a powerful role in maintaining their status in the social system, and therefore play a part in the problems between men and women" (p. 274). This problem has become evident with the recent decline in Black marriages. The literature (Dickson, 1993; Kelly, 2001; Pinderhughes) suggests the impact of stereotype on Black men regarding the topic of marriage is highly significant. The results from this study provide a foundation for investigating these suggestions. Issues such as financial attainment (Cherlin, 1998, Kinnon, 2003; Pinderhughes; Taylor, 1998), unequal sex ratio (Allen

& Olson, 2001; Dickson; Kelly; Pinderhughes), the legacy of slavery (Bell, 1999; Besharov & West 2002; Bethea, 1995; Taylor), the increasing rate of incarceration among Black males (Kiecolt & Fossett, 1997; Marano, 1997) and education levels (Pinderhughes; Staples, 1982; Taylor) have all been linked to influence Black male's perception of marriage. This research will review these issues.

Objectives

This pilot study investigated factors related to the decline in black marriages. The primary goal is to support or rebut factors currently presented in the literature and introduce those not previously discussed. The results will be used to develop an understanding of the continuing decline in Black Marriage. This research has the potential to impact the Black community by recognizing factors associated with the destruction of the Black family (in a traditional sense of marriage), while identifying areas that need improvement regarding marriage. Specifically, the research questions are: (1) Do stereotypes impact Black males' perception of marriage? If so, which stereotypes are the most significant? (2) What are the views/themes associated with Black men and marriage? Are they positive or negative? And (3) Are there factors the sample perceives as important links with decisions to marry that are not currently presented in the literature?

Method

Population/Sample

The sample consisted of Black male students from two of the University of Kentucky's Black Student Associations. The associations are Black Student Union and the Black Graduate and Professional Student Association. The study operationalizes "Black" to encompass all UK students who identify themselves racially as Black, African American, or Bi-Racial (having one

Black parent). Using “Black” as the ethnic identifier in this study allows for less confusion among the participants in choosing one of the many ethnic labels. There is an estimate of 35 males in the Black Student Union and 15 males in the Black Graduate and Professional Student Association. All men present at the association meeting were given a survey to complete. Of the targeted sample, a response rate of 100 % was achieved, given all individuals receiving a survey, completed the survey. The members of these two associations largely consist of Black male students who fall within the suggested age range.

The Black Student Union is an organization that focuses on the development and success of Black undergraduate students by providing these students with social and academic support. The Black Graduate and Professional Student Organization is a social-academic organization geared toward the academic success of Black graduate and professional students. The data for this research were obtained from a convenience sample of 25 Black male students between the ages of 18-30 from two of the University of Kentucky’s Black Student Associations.

Limitations to this sample design include the limited sample size. The fact that the results are only reflective of Black males in these two University of Kentucky organizations, the results are not reflective of all Black males in college or even at the University of Kentucky. A larger, more representative sample will be used for future studies to allow for more generalizability of the findings.

Instrumentation

Data were collected through a selected-response pencil-and-paper survey. The survey instrument was constructed by the research team after a thorough review of the literature. The questions comprising the survey were created from previous research on area of Black males and marriage. The instrument addresses common stereotypes and beliefs about marriage in the Black

community. The survey consists of 22 statements to be answered on a 4-point Likert-type scale (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree). Examples of the survey statements are: *For a Black man, there are more benefits of marriage than shortcomings;* and *Married men spend less time with their friends.* The strength of using this design is the capability to investigate attitudes and opinions that are otherwise not observable. To further address perceptions of Black men and marriage, three open-response questions were developed to garner a better understanding of the participants' opinions. The open-response questions have a higher validity and low manipulative quality in participants' responses. An example of an open-response question is, *Provide views that you associate with Black men and marriage.*

Data Collection

After receiving approval from the University of Kentucky Institutional Review Board (IRB), the research team contacted the acting presidents for each association and received permission to recruit members of their organizations to participate in this study. The research team attended one meeting of each of the aforementioned organizations to recruit volunteers to participate in the study. After recruiting volunteers, a member of the research team attended the next organizational meeting to administer the survey. Each participant was given a consent form to read and sign to formally acknowledge his acceptance to participate in this study. The survey required approximately 15 minutes to complete. Upon completion of the surveys, the researcher collected the surveys and placed them in a sealed envelope. All raw data were securely stored.

Analysis

All data were coded and placed into an SPSS file. Given the responses are perceptions; missing data were treated as missing as it is reasonable to believe that individual's responding may not have an opinion about a particular field of study for many reasons, such as that the

program is not offered at their institution. A participant's survey was deemed valid and included in the analysis if at least 70% of the survey had been completed. Surveys that did not meet the criteria were disposed. Basic descriptive statistics (including frequencies and means) were computed to explore the impact of stereotypes on black males' perception of marriage. With regard to the open response questions, a content analysis was conducted to identify any themes in the responses. The raw data (surveys) were discarded after being entered into the system to maintain anonymity for the participants, as a few individuals wrote their names on the survey and/or offered additional contact information. The analysis was conducted to identify if there is a significant impact of stereotypes on Black male college student's perception of marriage. The results from this study are presented as a pilot study for future research in this area.

Results

Forty-four percent (11) of the participants fell within the age range of 18-20, while the other participants were divided between the 21-25 age range and the 26 and older range. In terms of marital status, 80% (20) of the participants identified themselves as single, while only 8% identified being in a committed relationship or married. One individual identified himself as being engaged. The majority of the participants were working towards completion of a bachelor's degree (76%). The other participants were either working on a master's degree (8%), or doctoral degree (12%). One individual had completed his doctorate.

Table 1 presents the range of scores, means, and standard deviations for each statement on the survey. Each response for this survey was given a numerical value. Strongly disagree was given a value of 1, Disagree a value of 2, Agree a value of 3, and Strongly Agree a value of 4. Results indicated the highest mean response was 3.40 with a standard deviation of 0.764 for the statement *Your level of education can make you a more "attractive" partner when it comes to*

marriage. Black men do not have to work on maintaining the marriage because they can easily find another woman was the statement that generated the lowest mean response, 1.72 with a standard deviation of 0.843.

The statistics show the participants did not use the full range of responses on some items. For example, with the statement *Sexual activity decreases when you get married*, the responses reported by the participants ranged from Strongly Disagree to Agree, with a mean of 2.33 and standard deviation of .637. The statement, *There are fewer examples of successful Black marriages*, also derived a limited range of responses by the participants, yielding a mean of 2.88 and a standard deviation of 0.665.

Results revealed another statement in which respondents did not use all responses: *All Black men want to get married*. The range of responses for this statement was composed of Strongly Disagree to Agree with the mean response of 1.83 with a standard deviation of 0.481. An interesting, but not surprising, underutilized response range was in the statement addressing hesitancy in Black men about getting married in fear of losing their friends. The range of responses was between Strongly Disagree and Agree, with a mean and standard deviation of 1.88 (0.33). Eighty-eight of the participants disagreed with that statement. The low mean could be due to the difficulty to agree with items such as this, almost a social expectation. Table 1 displays the results of the analysis.

For the three open-response questions provided on the survey, a content analysis was conducted to identify any themes that were present in the data. The first open-response question asked the participants whether they viewed marriage as being positive or negative and why they held that view. Eighty-eight percent of the participants viewed marriage positively, depending on the situation. For example, one participant wrote: "If you are ready, marriage is so much easier

when two people work together, life is so much easier.” Many participants with a positive view noted the religious aspect of marriage, such as, “God did not mean for man to be alone. Men have desires that only a good wife can fulfill. Man should have a life partner, example Adam and Eve.” Other themes included reproduction purposes and the likelihood of spending the rest of your life with someone special. Two participants viewed marriage as being both positive and negative, “It can be a wonderful experience or it could be something bad.” No participant in this survey perceived marriage as being a negative component of life, even though the current low marriage rates and high rate of divorce suggests otherwise.

The second open-response question asked participants to identify views they associate with Black men and marriage. Some comments are not easily classified as negative or positive. For example, an interesting statement was given in regard to marriage and socio-economic status: “People [Black men and women] from the hood don’t get married.” The majority of the views appeared to be negative. Participants stated that Black men fear commitment, are always being viewed as “cheaters,” “playas,” and “sexually aggressive,” or “not getting married at all.” An example of these perceptions can be seen in the statement, “Some say Black men and marriage is a joke because Black men will cheat on their wives.” One participant stated there are not many examples of young Black couples to observe. Some alluded to the impact of education on black men and marriage, for example, “Black men are narrow about marriage. Black men often have insecurities about the relative intellectual abilities or educational status, and both are desired to be high by Black women in a male partner.”

On the contrary, some participants viewed Black men and marriage positively. A participant stated that he personally viewed Black and Marriage as being positive, but he was

“aware of the many negative views society associates with Black men and marriage as seen in music, TV, and movies.”

The final question asked participants to provide three words that they associate with marriage. The most frequently associated words were: “Love”, “Trust”, and “Commitment.” Other frequent words associated with marriage were “Children”, “Life”, and “Communication.” These words appear to have a positive view of marriage. Some other words fall more to the negative aspects of marriage, “Stress”, “Hardships”, “Trials”, “Tribulations”, and “Handcuffs.” Some participants provided words reflecting the more appealing aspects of marriage, “Caring”, “Sacrifice”, “Intimacy”, “Loyalty”, “Blessing”, and “Soul Mate.”

Discussion

The goal of this study was to see if stereotypes impacted Black males’ perception of marriage and if so, which were the most significant. The results indicated that stereotypes appeared to have some impact on Black males’ perception of marriage, but stereotypes appeared to be more significant than others. This is evident in the belief that marriage is more beneficial for men than for woman. The literature suggests this belief is true and the results from this study support this belief (See Table 1), although participants in this study disagree with the statement that all Black men want to get married. Another stereotype that had a significant bearing on participant’s perception of marriage was the male influence on the household. Participants agreed men should be the head of the household (32% strongly agreed and 48% agreed). Having these patriarchal views of the family could add to the divide in the dissolving relationship between Black men and women.

Participants in this study appeared to consistently mirror the majority of the concepts presented in the literature regarding Black males and marriage. What is intriguing about these

results is some of the new themes that have been revealed. As stated earlier, a common theory used to discuss the decline in Black marriages is the Mate Availability Theory (Taylor, 1998). Participants did not confirm this theory in their responses to the item that addressed it, *Black males don't have to work on maintaining a marriage because they can easily find another woman*. Forty-four percent of the participants strongly disagreed while 48% disagreed with this statement. Another statement supporting the Mate Availability Theory is, *Monogamy makes men hesitant to marry*. The range of responses for the participants resulted in 8% Strongly Disagreed, 28% Disagree, 52% Agreed, and 12% Strongly Agreed.

The themes the participants associated with marriage were generally positive. This is consistent with the majority of participants (88%) viewing marriage as being positive. The three most common words associated with marriage were Love, Trust, and Commitment. Some themes that were presented by the participants suggest some uncertainty about marriage depending on the relationship itself. For example, such responses as, “Depends on situation...Again it depends on the situation if they are clearly not right for each other then its bad.” Participants appear to believe marriage is what you put into it, “If (marriage is) done for the correct reasons b/c you can get the rest of your life with you soul mate,” “If you are ready, marriage is great because when two people work together life is so much easier.” On the other hand, many participants reported negative perceptions regarding Black men and marriage. Examples consist of “Some say that black men and marriage is a joke b/c the males will cheat on their wives” and “It's hard for Black men to stay with the woman.” There was one elaborative response addressing the negative view of Black men and marriage, “Black men are narrow, about marriage, black men often have insecurities about the relative intellectual abilities or educational status, and both are desired to be high by black women in a male partner. Some black mean see

little value in marriage b/c of household experience (or lack thereof).” One participant placed blame on Black women, “Hard to keep Black women satisfied, every time we go out, the wife thinks we're creepin, not all black males are scandalous, wanna-be ‘playas’. “A theme that is present in the literature and in the results of this study is the negative perception of Black males regarding marriage or any other romantic relationship. Black males appear to be unable to elude the stereotypes and the myths, (e.g. “cheaters,” “playas,” and “sexually aggressive”), placed upon them by society regarding marriage. The literature suggests these stereotypes do not have as much effect on men as they do on Black women. The inability to evade these myths emerges as a possible cause in the decline in marriage in the Black Community. Although there were some participants who positively associated Black men and marriage, most participants in this study reflected the negative views reported in the literature.

The sample did not appear to perceive any other motivations to marry or remain single that were not already in the literature. What the sample did distinguish was the importance of the lack of successful examples of Black marriages in society. As previously mentioned, in the open response section, one participant reported there were not many examples of young Black couples to observe. This was supported by 56% of the participants agreeing with this statement in the survey section of the questionnaire. If this is true, what impact is this having on young Black males’ opinion of marriage?

What was also exposed by this sample was the difference in opinion about the impact of slavery on Black male and female relationships. Forty-four percent of the participants disagreed with the statement *Slavery has an impact on Black male and female relationships*. Whereas, 40% agreed that slavery has an impact on Black male and female relationships. This divide within the sample brings attention to the importance of this aspect, suggesting further research is needed.

Conclusion

Given the nature of a study, a pilot, the instrument itself is somewhat of a limiting factor. The survey was created based on a thorough review of the literature and had not been through a statistical assessment of reliability and validity. Using the participants' feedback and further measurement analysis, the instrument will undergo a reconstruction. Some of the statements on this survey need to be edited, while additional statements should be added to address additional concepts related to Black men and marriage. A further limitation is the source and size of the sample, making it unsuitable to generalize the findings to all Black male college students. Not all Black male college students are members of such associations or even attend college. With the sample mainly comprised of men age 18-20, a portion of even the college population is missing. A larger, more representative sample will be used for future studies.

Future research is needed to fully investigate the impact of stereotypes of Black males on their perception of marriage. The results will support an understanding of the continuing decline in Black Marriage. Conducting a similar study with Black males in interracial marriages could provide more insight on the impact of stereotypes. Comparison of perceptions between White and Black males would also be of interest, as well as a review and comparison of Black females' perceptions of marriage to their male counterparts. The results of this study provide a foundation to continue research in this area and possibly pinpoint the most influential factors and introduce factors not yet identified as affecting the rates of Black marriages and divorce.

The results of this pilot study will contribute to African-American Studies, Psychology and Marriage and Family Therapy fields. By providing insights into perceptions of marriage, the research could lead to developing techniques and strategies to address the influence of

stereotypes on an individual's perception of marriage, subsequently supporting and preparing Black males for marriage and in turn, increasing marital satisfaction.

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Table 1. Descriptive Summary of Survey Items

Statement	N	Mean	SD
More benefits than shortcomings	25	3.04	0.79
Don't have to work on maintaining a marriage	25	1.72	0.84
Black men to be "head" of household	25	3.04	0.89
Difficult to find a "good" black woman to marry	25	2.52	0.77
Sex decreases when married	24	2.33	0.64
Slavery impact on black m/f relationships	25	2.60	0.76
Black men are more faithful than other men	23	1.96	0.82
Education can make you a more attractive partner for marriage	25	3.40	0.76
Marriage in the black community more likely to end in divorce	25	2.08	0.70
Hesitant to marry in fear of losing friends	25	1.88	0.33
Monogamy makes men hesitant to marry	25	2.68	0.80
Black women view Black men as being triflin or sorry	25	2.56	0.77
Infidelity is common practice in the Black community	25	2.40	0.58
Married men spend less time with their friend	25	2.72	0.61
Black women get better jobs than black men.	25	2.60	0.82
Have to have a good job to be a good partner and have a lasting marriage	25	2.48	0.82
All Black men want to get married	24	1.83	0.48
Marriage can be viewed as being on lock down	25	2.92	0.81
Sex decreases when you have children	24	2.71	0.62
Fewer examples of successful Black Marriages	25	2.88	0.67