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The Impact of Stereotypes of Black Male College Student's

Perception of Marriage

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Impact of Stereotypes on Black Male College Student's Perception of Marriage

Over the past decade, the institution of marriage has been influenced and damaged by factors such as divorce, infidelity, and financial strain. These factors have been seen in many different cultures and races. One of the most effected cultures and races is the Black community. According to the 2000 U.S. Bureau of Census, 16% of Black males were married, compared to 60% of White males. On the other hand, 37% of Black females were married in comparison to 57% of White females. The question then becomes: What is impacting the rate of Black marriage?

Broman (1993) names the expectations that are brought to the marriage. Those expectations consist of financial support, emotional support, sexual behavior, and childcare. Other suggestions include the impact of slavery, unequal sex ratio, socioeconomic conditions, stereotypes, Black male-female relationships, levels of education, health concerns, structural causes, etc (Staples, 1981, Chapman, 1983, Zollar & Williams, 1987, Dickson, 1993; Kelly, 2001; Pinderhughes, 2002). The focus of this study is to see what stereotypes (, if any), are impacting Black male's perception of marriage and if applicable to what degree.

Background

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" (p. 114, Franzoi, 2000). Stereotypes have been made about such things as race, education, socioeconomic status, ability, and religion. Researchers discussed the impact of racial and gender stereotypes on concrete entities such as grades, test scores, and academic identity (Ainsworth-Darnell &

Downey, 1998, Steele, 1999). Steele observed that Black students were not performing as well as their white counterparts, and he began to question the cause in the gap of performance. He suggests that the "gap" in educational performance may be attributed to the social and economic deprivation of Blacks. White et al. (1973, as cited in Ogbu, 1981) points out children from black ghettos and similar "disadvantaged" minorities are not successful in school and society because they do not have the early childhood benefits such as dual parent homes, access to technology, and abstract skills. He also states that "society views blacks through the lens of diminishing stereotypes and low expectations…" (p.55). This concept is what he refers to as the Stereotype Threat.

Stereotypes of Black males and females can be seen as a factor in the success of romantic relationships and marriages. Dickson (1993) stresses that, "…we cannot ignore the impact of socialization within the Black family, stereotypes about Black men and women that are perpetuated within the Black community…" (p.480). Pinderhughes (2002) states "stereotypes of Black 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). Bulcroft (1993) states, in comparison to their White counterparts, that Black women perceive marriage as less valuable and more exploitive, while Black men are more traditional in their sex-role ideologies, which increases the likelihood of marital dissatisfaction. The stereotypes of Black men consist of them being identified as irresponsible, abusive, lazy, exploitive, and incapable of marital commitment (Dickson, 1993; Kelly, 2001; Pinderhughes, 2002). Pinderhughes continues on to say that work must be done to avoid the internalizing of these stereotypes so that these stereotypes do not become the basis of relationship conflict.

A common stereotype of African-American men is that they are viewed as oversexed beings and dreadfully promiscuous (Dickson, 1993, South, 1993, Kelly, 2001). Furstenburg, Morgan, Moore, & Peterson (1987, as cited by South, 1993) believe that the earlier initiation of sexual behavior by Blacks allows for the decline of marriage and regular sexual relations for Black men. South (1993) discusses the expected increase in sexual relations upon marriage as a difference between black and white men in their desire to marry. Research suggests that marriage can lead to an enhanced sex life, but black males are less likely to believe that marriage will enhance their sex life (South, 1993).

Numerous research studies have been conducted on the relationship between Black males and females. During the late 1980's and early 1990's, there has been a significant decline in the marriage rate among Blacks (Dickson, 1993). South (1993) reveals that black men and women are significantly less desiring of marriage, than their white counterparts. Studies report that 72% of Blacks between 20-29 years of age had never married (Glick, 1998 as cited in Dickson, 1993). During this time period, Black men made up 47% of the prison population (Pinderhughes, 2002). Researchers refer to this phenomenon as the "unequal sex ratio" (Dickson, 1993; Kelly, 2001; Pinderhughes, 2002). Dickson (1993) addresses this phenomenon by discussing the specified causes of the unequal sex ratio such as substance abuse, health problems, homicide rate among Black men (six times higher than white males), and dating outside of the race. Secord (1983, as cited in Chapman, 1988) affirm that whenever there has been an excess of females in a society, there was a devaluing of monogamy and marriage. Guttentag and Secord (1983, as cited in Dickson 1993) state that when men are in short supply, they

hold the balance of emotional power in a relationship. This allows men not to work as hard emotionally in relationships because they can always find another woman. Relying on the unequal sex ratios, unmarried black men have a greater number of potential sex partners available to them (Staples, 1976, South, 1993). Chapman (1988) states that unequal ratio could lead to what has been called "mate sharing." This is when two or more women may share one man. Individuals participating in mate sharing may be married or single, or even unaware of the status. Staples (1976) believed that this immense number of potential sexual partners has lead to the Black male's reluctance to marry.

The impact of the unequal sex ratio can be seen elsewhere. American society heavily promotes self-reliance in women, which leads to women becoming more educated, attaining better jobs, and becoming more self-supportive and self-reliant. An example of this has been brought to the forefront by findings stating among administrative and managerial workers, there are 127 Black women to 100 men; 151 professional Black women to 100 men (Pinderhughes, 2002). The society, in which these statistics are relevant, can be characterized by higher divorce rates, many single-parent families, and illegitimate births (Dickson, 1993).

Socioeconomic conditions and status can be attributed to the decline of marriage in the Black community (Dickson, 1993; Pinderhughes, 2002). Pinderhughes discusses the socioeconomic conditions that effect Black marriages. She states in her article that, "African American men who have stable employment are twice as likely to marry as men who do not" (p.273). The view upon employment and marriage has changed from the prior. Dickson states that Black men perceived no economic benefit of marriage, even

though studies have shown that black men can gain more financially from marriage than white men (South, 1993). Edelman (1987) revealed that 1986 was the first year that the average number of employed Black women exceeded the average number of employed Black men (as cited in Dickson, 1993).

Other factors were identified as impacting black males and their perception of marriage. Researchers identify strong peer group attachment, the importance of group membership, and the possible constriction of personal freedom upon marriage (Anderson, 1989 and Hannerz, 1969 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 their peers. Anderson continues on by saying that the middle-class norms regarding marriage and family conflict with the values of their peer group. Young black males view a wife and children as a burden on friendships and personal freedom, according to Anderson. Another aspect is with the low marriage rates for black men, young black men will have few friends that are married. With this in mind, if their friends are not married, why should they get married?

Research suggests that black men are seen as unable to fulfill a highly salient traditional breadwinner role, which reduces their propensities to offer marriage (Bulcroft, 1993, South, 1993). With these ideas in mind, the decline of marriage can be explained. Dickson (1993) cites a study by Wilson (1987) that connects Black male joblessness to high divorce rates, low remarriage rates, and a high rate of unwed births.

Objectives

The purpose of this study is twofold: To explore the impact of stereotypes on black males' perception of marriage and to establish a foundation for future research as a result of this pilot study. The findings of this study will help understand the recent decline in Black Marriage, in addition to, assisting in comprehending low marital satisfaction rates among Black males. This study along with previous research can benefit the Black community by understanding what is causing the recent destruction of the Black family, while identifying areas that need improvement regarding marriage.

The results of this pilot study can reap many benefits to the field of Black Studies, Psychology, and Marriage and Family Therapy. Given the purpose to identify impacts of stereotypes of black males and their perception of marriage, when impact or influence is identified, future research could lead to developing techniques and strategies to address the influence of stereotypes of black males on their perception of marriage. An additional contribution of this study could be supporting African American males better prepare for marriage and increasing their marital satisfaction upon being married.

Methodology

Population/Sample

The sample will consist of single (unmarried) African-American 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 age range of these students will be from 18-30 years. There is an estimate of 35 males in the Black Student Union and 20 males in the Black Graduate and Professional Student Association. If a response rate of 50% for each group is achieved, an adequate sample will be established. The purpose for using these two associations as the sample is

that the male members of these two associations are the focal point of this study. The

members of these associations consist partly of single Black male students who ages fall

within the suggested range. The Black Student Union is an organization of Black

undergraduate students focused on the development and success by providing social and

academic support for the Black student at the University of Kentucky. The Black

Graduate and Professional Student Organization is a social-academic organization geared

toward the academic success of graduate and professional students. For this study, a

census sample of the members of the organizations ranging in age from 18-30, who

identify themselves as African-American and male, will be included in the response

frame. The estimated number of male members in these associations will allow for an

adequate sample for a pilot study. In the future, a larger sample will be used to allow for

the generalizability of the findings.

Data Collection and Analysis

As an instrument to address common stereotypes and beliefs about marriage in the

Black community, researchers constructed a selected-response survey after thorough

review of the literature. The questions composing the survey were created from previous

research on area of Black males and marriage. The survey consists of 16 statements to be

answered on a 4-point Likert-type scale (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly

Agree) using pencil and paper.

The researcher attended one meeting of the mentioned organizations to recruit

volunteers to participate in this study. After gathering volunteers, the researcher

assembled the volunteers in a central location on campus to administer the survey.

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. Upon completion of the surveys, the researcher collected each completed survey and placed in a sealed envelope until the data was entered into SPSS. For their time and efforts, each participant received basic refreshments as a form of compensation.

The data will be collected during the fall of 2004. For a survey to be included in analysis, deemed a valid response, 70% of the survey needs to be completed by the participants. Surveys that do not meet the criteria for being a valid response will be disposed of. The raw data will be coded and placed into a database (SPSS). Basic descriptive statistics will be computed. Given the responses are perceptions; missing data will be treated as missing. The raw data (surveys) will be discarded after being entered into the system to maintain confidentiality and anonymity for the participants. These statistics will identify if there is a significant impact of stereotypes on Black male college student's perception of marriage.

Limitations

A major limitation to this study is the reliability of the survey. Being that the researcher created the survey, the reliability of the instrument is questionable, however, it is based on a theoretical foundation rooted in literature. Generalizability of the findings to all Black male college students appears to be a limitation because of the source of the sample. Not all Black male college students are members in such associations. Also, these results are not applicable to those Black males age 18-30 years who are not in college.

Future Research

Future research is needed to fully investigate the impact of stereotypes of black males on

their perception of marriage. Future research could consist of applying the findings of this

study to black males in interracial marriages. Furthermore, the results of this study could

bright to light more factors that are effecting the rates of Black marriages and divorce.

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