Black Men and the Decision to Marry

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Abstract
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Keywords
African-American, Black families, marriage, qualitative research

Disciplines
Civic and Community Engagement | Community-Based Research | Family, Life Course, and Society | Human Ecology | Race and Ethnicity

Comments
This is an accepted manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Marriage & Family Review on August 2014, available online: http://www.tandf.com/doi: 10.1080/01494929.2014.905816
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This is a manuscript for an article from Marriage and Family Review, 50(6), 2014; 447-479. Doi: 10.1080/01494929.2014.905816. Posted with permission.
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Author note: Tera R. Jordan publishes using her maiden name Tera R. Hurt. The National Center for Family and Marriage Research funded this project. The author thanks Dr. Steven Beach of the University of Georgia for permission to recruit men for this study from the Program for Strong African American Marriages Study, as well as his feedback on a previous version of this manuscript. She also is grateful for the support of a devoted research team who assisted with the data collection and implementation of the Pathways to Marriage Project. The author is indebted to the 52 Black men in Georgia who openly shared their marital experiences with the interviewers. Hazel Hunley provided valuable editorial support and Malinda Mabry-Scott’s help with the transcription was useful. Stacey McElroy and Laila Ali-Husin supported this work by offering helpful assistance with literature searches and member-checks. Dr. Chalandra M. Bryant of the University of Georgia, in addition to the anonymous reviewers, gave helpful comments on an earlier draft of this manuscript.
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Abstract

The purpose of this descriptive study is to understand the decision to marry among a sample of 52 married Black men. Qualitative inquiry was used to explore this issue. The men noted five factors that encouraged marriage: wife’s characteristics, spirituality, desire to be together, readiness to marry, and encouragement from others. Five barriers to marriage were personal reservations, perceived loss of freedom, disapproval from others, prior relationship experiences, and finances. Forty-four percent reported they would marry at the same time, if they had to make the choice to marry again while 30% would opt to marry later and 23% would select to marry earlier. Three percent of men would not choose to marry again. Implications are discussed.
Studies have focused on the role of marriage markets and individual-level factors that impact an individual’s decision to marry. Conditions in the marriage market, workforce, and education influence the likelihood that individuals will marry (King & South, 2011; Lloyd & South, 1996; Oppenheimer, 1988). Moreover, falling in love along with one’s spirituality, developmental needs, and family of origin experiences could also affect the decision to marry (King & South, 2011; Lawson & Thompson, 1999; Willoughby, Carroll, Vitas, & Hill, 2011). In addition, marriage is likely after one has achieved certain developmental milestones and found a partner who shares in their goals and values (Lawson & Thompson, 1999).

Though the literature is well-established, much of the published work to date employs survey data which precludes a finer understanding of the decision to marry. Furthermore, some scholars have found it difficult to identify factors that influence marital timing for Blacks (Teachman, Polonko, & Leigh, 1987). For this reason, scholars have petitioned for new research to uncover nuances or subtle distinctions in the decision to marry in this population (Lawson & Thompson, 1999; Oppenheimer, Kalmijn, & Lim, 1997; Teachman, Polonko, & Leigh, 1987). As noted by Axinn and Thornton (1992), a clearer understanding about factors involved in the decision to marry will help provide more insight about marital formation. In addition, scholars have also called for more work using samples of men in general, and Black men in particular. Black men have not been sampled in previous studies (Koball, 1998; Marks et al., 2008; Oppenheimer, Kalmihn, & Lim, 1997). Earlier work demonstrates that it is important to consider men and women separately in investigations on marital formation because life course events affect the two genders differently, which may give rise to distinctive subtleties (Call, 1977).
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Adopting a different methodological approach (e.g., qualitative interviews) should permit more detailed understanding of how individual-level factors influence the decision to marry, which is sorely needed in the literature (Schneider, 2011; Teachman, Polonko, & Leigh, 1987; Voss, 1975). Therefore, the purpose of this descriptive study is to explore the decision to marry among a sample of 52 married Black men, an understudied population relative to race and gender. Qualitative interviews were conducted and the men were interviewed about factors that motivated their decision to marry as well as barriers they overcame in marrying their wives. The men were also questioned about the timing of their marriages. The in-depth interviews provide the men to describe their marital formation experiences in their own voices, which in turn, makes a significant contribution to existing literature since scholars have called for more exploration of the decision to marry among Black men (Marks, Nesteruk, Swanson, Garrison, & Davis, 2005; Michael & Tuma, 1985).

**Background**

Marriage is a critical transition in the life course that affords individuals adult status, as they take on new roles and responsibilities (Koball, 1998). Scholars suggest that marriage is perhaps the most important life-cycle transition among adult males, in particular (Hogan, 1978; Nock, 1998). Marriage uniquely offers benefits in physical, psychological, and financial well-being (Blackman, Clayton, Glenn, Malone-Colon, & Roberts, 2005; Malone-Colon, 2007). When marriage is delayed, the benefits that marriage offers are limited (Blackman, Clayton, Glenn, Malone-Colon, & Roberts, 2005; Malone-Colon, 2007; Schneider, 2011). Therefore, it is important to learn more about factors that encourage and discourage an individual’s decision to marry.
Social exchange theory can be used as a conceptual guide to highlight factors which may be significant to attend to in the decision to marry. A key assumption of this theory is that self-interest is the primary motivation for people’s actions and that they make relationship decisions in a rational manner by considering rewards and costs (Bradbury & Karney, 2010; Homans, 1974). Adults will only choose marriage when marrying offers more rewards (e.g., status, approval, companionship, partner resources and abilities, emotional and psychological support) than costs (e.g., financial strain, frequent arguments, relationship stress, lost opportunity to pursue other relationships) (Bradbury & Karney, 2010; Griffin, 2003; Hopkins-Williams, 2007). Scholars have asserted that there are few advantages to marrying unless each spouse contributes unique skills or qualities to the union (Oppenheimer, 1988; South, 1992).

Moreover, assessing one’s relationship satisfaction involves spouses comparing relationship outcomes to a specific standard of what the person believes they deserve (Bradbury & Karney, 2010). Personal experiences influence the comparison level and reflect individual’s expectations of the kind of rewards and costs they can expect from a relationship. Independent of the comparison level is another concept called comparison level for alternatives, which is the minimum rewards an individual needs from a relationship before considering other options (e.g., choose to be alone, stay in relationship, exit relationship) (Bradbury & Karney, 2010; Griffin, 2003). Social exchange theory is beneficial for understanding how factors like—marriage market, employment, education, love, spirituality, development, and family of origin experiences—shape the decision to marry. Next, empirical work on these factors is discussed.

Previous work has noted the salience of marriage market conditions in the decision to marry. Oppenheimer (1988) asserts that variations in marital formation are a consequence of difficulties that individuals encounter in finding a partner with complementary traits. Lichter,
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McLaughlin, Kephart, and Landry (1992) suggest that differences in marriage markets (e.g., deficit in marriageable spouses) account for racial disparities in marriage. For example, in studies on Blacks, much of the work has identified men's inability to secure well-paying jobs as a barrier to marriage (Clayton & Moore, 2003; Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005; Marks et al., 2008). Individuals are less likely to form unions when faced with economic uncertainty and difficult structural conditions that undermine the ability to provide for a family (Anderson, 1999; Pinderhughes, 2002; Waller, 1999).

Education (inclusive of professional training and military service) has been widely noted as a significant factor related to the decision to marry (Voss, 1975; Marini, 1978). Educational achievement fosters marital stability in the long-term but delays marital formation in the short-term (Hogan, 1978; Koball, 1998; Lloyd & South, 1996; Marks et al., 2008; Otto, 1979). Educational attainment is a proxy for earning capacity, and hence, operates similar to employment (Sassler & Goldscheider, 2004). Indeed, labor force participation and job security have been strongly linked to marital formation (Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005; King & South, 2011; Smock, Manning, & Porter, 2005). For example, among men, career decisions will impact marital aspirations; deciding to marry early may negatively impact a man’s ability to experiment with different jobs in search of more fulfilling work (Oppenheimer, 1988). Furthermore, prior work shows that individuals delay marriage until they achieve specific milestones inclusive of working a steady job, owning a car, residing in a home, and securing financial assets (e.g., bank account, retirement account) (Edin, 2000; Lawson & Thompson, 1999; Schneider, 2011). Postponing marriage is particularly likely for men who have not yet achieved these milestones (Goldscheider & Waite, 1986; Schneider, 2011).
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Social, psychological, and religious factors also influence marital formation (Bennett, Bloom, & Craig, 1989; Cherlin, 1992; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995). For example, the primary motivation for marrying in the United States is love (Coontz, 2005; South, 1993). Spouses also expect their mates to meet their psychological and social needs (Coontz, 2005). Not surprisingly, many unions can now be characterized as individualized-marriages. In these marriages, spouses enjoy the partnership that marriage offers, and husbands and wives expect emotional intimacy and love, flexibility in gender roles, open communication, and support to pursue opportunities that foster personal growth (Lamanna & Riedmann, 2012). Attraction to a spouse based on their individual characteristics like physical appearance, personality characteristics, and sex appeal is also significant to consider (Oppenheimer, 1988).

Spirituality could also impact one’s decision to marry. Faith communities and religious doctrines may encourage marriage and positively influence an individual’s choice to wed (Call, 1977; King & South, 2011; Otto, 1979). This is a particular consideration among Blacks given the high regard for spirituality and religion in Black culture (LaTaillade, 2006; Pew Charitable Trust, 2009; Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004). Blacks are significantly more religious than the general population (Chatters, Taylor, & Lincoln, 1999; Pew Charitable Trust, 2009), and religious participation has been traced to Black marriage patterns (Hopkins-Williams, 2007; Hunt & Hunt, 2001; Hurt, 2013).

One’s own developmental trajectory also relates to the decision to marry. Otto (1979) documented the significance of development, emotional maturity, and psychological maturity for promoting marital formation. An individual’s marital aspirations are also critical to consider (South, 1993; Voss, 1975). Previous work has concluded that the motivation to marry as well as beliefs and values about marital formation reflect a person’s views of the perceived costs and
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benefits of marriage, as well as their preparedness for marriage (Hill, 2004; King & South, 2011; Lawson & Thompson, 1999). For example, some Black men have reported the reduced availability of partners for sex (South, 1993), lost personal freedom to make one’s own decisions, and limited opportunities to socialize with peers (Anderson, 1999; South, 1993) as costs of marrying.

Another challenge to consider in the decision to marry is strong ties to kin. Martin and Martin (1978) note,

The unique composition of the black extended family and its system of interdependency plays a role in individual family member’s choice of a marriage partner and, to varying degrees, in the shape a marriage will take. It is advantageous for a potential spouse to gain the approval of members of the partner’s extended family, especially the dominant figure (p. 60).

Other work has also outlined how close relationships with extended family and allegiance to the family unit can promote marital formation or undermine the likelihood of marriage (Brown, Perry, & Harburg, 1977; Hatchett, Veroff, & Douvan, 1995; Sassler & Goldscheider, 2004). Lawson and Thompson (1999) point out that a man’s inability to financially support family members as well as a wife and children may undermine the likelihood of marriage.

Earlier research underscores how family structure and the tenor of an individual’s family relationships influence an individual’s likelihood of marriage, with high-quality relationships and two-parent families being associated with delayed marriage (Goldscheider & Waite, 1986; King & South, 2011; Van Poppel, Monden, & Mondemakers, 2008; Willoughby, Carroll, Vitas, & Hill, 2011). For example, Li and Wojtkiewicz (1994) concluded that residing in a mother-only family was linked to earlier marriage in adulthood while living in a mother-only stepparent
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family was associated with marrying later. Among Blacks, family structure did not explain patterns of entry into marriage. The authors hypothesized that diverse family living arrangements were more common in the Black community, thus reducing the impact of residing in various one-parent and two-parent household arrangements (Li & Wojtkiewicz, 1994). To be sure, the foundation for trusting others intimately is set very early in one’s development. Developmental theories underscore the salience of parents and caregivers on the relationship socialization of offspring (Anderson & Sabatelli, 1995; Bowlby, 1979; Bryant & Conger, 2002).

Indeed, previous work has explored the influential role of the marriage market and individual-level factors in the decision to marry. Yet, most of the studies to date have employed survey methodologies and highlighted results from race comparative analyses (Teachman, Polonko, & Leigh, 1987). One notable study, however, sought to address this gap in the literature and advance the field. Lawson and Thompson (1999) conducted an in-depth study of 50 Black men who experienced divorced. Using qualitative methodology, they queried the men about the reasons for marrying their wives and obtained an intimate understanding of the men’s motivations for marrying. The following reasons were noted: “(a) being in love, (b) rescuing a former spouse from feelings of inadequacy, (c) changing a problematic behavioral trait, (d) feeling an appropriate time to marry, (e) desiring to be morally responsible to an unborn child, (f) needing someone while in the military, (g) desiring to parent based on assessment of the future spouse’s mothering potential, and (h) perceiving there was nothing better to do at the time” (Lawson & Thompson, 1999, p. 32).

In sum, the purpose of this descriptive study was to make a contribution to the literature in two ways. First, 52 Black men were queried about their decisions to marry. Scholars have ignored opportunities to obtain accounts about Black men’s marital experiences (Koball, 1998;
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Marks et al., 2008; Michael & Tuma, 1985). As such, a within-group design was adopted for this investigation. The men were studied to learn more about their marital experiences and explore the similarities and differences within group, without concern for looking at marital dynamics in a race-comparative fashion (Phinney & Landin, 1999). The goal was to describe issues that may be unique to Black men in the decision to marry and illuminate factors that may have been previously overlooked in studies. Second, qualitative interview data was gathered from men to capture their perspectives on the decision to marry in their own words. In addressing these two gaps in the literature, the research literature on Black marriages will be enhanced and scholars will be better equipped to develop more effective approaches to encourage marital formation among Blacks (Koball, 1998; Marks et al., 2008; Marks et al., 2008).

Method

Study

Qualitative data were collected from 52 married Black men who took part in the Program for Strong African American Marriages (ProSAAM), a randomized study of 393 couples that began in 2006 and ended in 2011. ProSAAM’s purpose was to examine the influence of skill-based intervention and prayer in building African American marital relationships. Participants were recruited from metropolitan Atlanta and northeast Georgia through advertisements at churches, community centers, radio shows, print media, and local businesses frequented by Black couples and families as well as referrals (see http://www.uga.edu/prosaam for more information).

Of the 393 couples who took part in ProSAAM, 109 husbands finished their three-year follow-up assessment by December 1, 2009, marking their completion of the larger ProSAAM study. Thus, the men were thus eligible to enroll in the present study called Pathways to
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Marriage. Brochures describing the project’s focus, eligibility criteria, risks and benefits, interview procedures, and study contact information were mailed to recruit these 109 men. Fifty-two men consented to participate; the men were enrolled on a first-come, first-served basis. Participating husbands were compensated $75 for completing one interview of approximately two hours in duration.

Sample

A brief survey was administered to the participants to collect demographic information. The mean age for the study sample was 43 (range 27-62). All men reported their race as Black. Relative to ethnicity, one man self-identified as Cuban American while the other men self-identified as African American. (Since not all men were African American, the men are described as Black. Black is used to be inclusive of different ethnicities like Cuban and African American.) At the time of interview, all men were married. Relative to education, 8% reported less than a high school education, 21% achieved a high school diploma or a GED, 27% obtained some education at a college or technical school, 19% earned a college degree, 10% received some graduate education, and 15% completed a graduate or advanced degree. The mean level of individual income was in the $30,000 - $39,999 range; the mean household income was $50,000 - $59,999. Individual incomes ranged widely; some men earned less than $5,000 per year while other men reported more than $80,000 per year. Sixty-eight percent attended a Christian church while 22% were parishioners at non-denominational Christian worship centers. Two percent reported no religion; 8% offered no response to the religious affiliation question. The modal number of biological children was two (range 0 – 7; mean = 2, 2% no response); the men lived in a home with two children on average (range 0 – 3) (2% no response).
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Seventy-three percent of the men were involved in their first marriage and had not been previously married. One-fifth of the men (21%) were married for a second time, two men (4%) reported being in their third marriage, and one man (2%) was in his fourth marriage. The average length of their current marriage was 14 years (range 2 – 35). Considering years of dating and marriage, the men recalled being romantically involved with their spouses for 16 years on average (range 3 – 41 years) (one participant = no response). The men were generally happy in their marriages. Using the degree of happiness item from the Marital Adjustment Test (Locke & Wallace, 1959), 15% were perfectly happy, 42% were very happy, 23% were happy, and 10% were somewhat happy. Eight percent were very unhappy (2% no response). Most men reported never separating from their wives (90%), while 8% noted a separation (2% no response). One respondent was currently separated from his wife (2%) at the time of interview; all others were co-residing with their wives (98%).

In the larger ProSAAM project, survey data was collected from the men using laptop computers at four waves of measurement—pre-test, post-test, 6-month follow-up, and 12-month follow-up. At each interview, the men were asked, “What was the primary reason you decided to marry your mate? What was the second reason you decided to marry your mate? What was the third reason you decided to marry your mate?” The men were provided with these answer choices to select from: (1) I was in love with her. (2) It was discovered that she was pregnant with my child. (3) I needed her support with raising children, making ends meet, etc. (4) I did not want to be alone and was ready to have my mate as my spouse. (5) I wanted to leave or escape from my parent/caregiver’s home. (6) I wanted to be an adult. (7) I felt that it was the right time. (8) We had known each other a long time. (9) Other. The men could only select each reason for marrying their wives one time; the computer was programmed to not permit the same option to
be selected for subsequent questions. Across all four waves, the men most frequently stated being in love with their wives as the primary reason they married (see Table 1). The men commonly skipped the second and third reason questions after selecting the primary reason for marrying their wives. Among the men who offered second and third reasons for marrying, most men cited being in love with their wives at pre-test; yet, at all subsequent waves, however, more men noted that they felt it was the right time. Similarly, for the third reason they married, most men stated that they felt it was the right time at all waves of data collection.

With regard to family of origin experiences, 62% of the men noted that their parents were continuously partnered throughout their childhoods (parents married: \( n = 28 \); parents in a relationship but not married: \( n = 4 \)). Among 38% of the men, their biological parents were not partnered due to marital divorce (\( n = 4 \)), a nonmarital relationship ending (\( n = 13 \)), or death (\( n = 3 \)). Parent’s relationship status, however, was not a good indicator of who reared the men. As such, the type of household that the men were raised in is considered. For 23% of the men, they recalled being raised by single mothers (\( n = 10 \)) and grandmothers (\( n = 2 \)). Another 73% stated that they dwelled in a two-parent living arrangement with biological parents and/or stepparents (\( n = 36 \)) or grandparents (\( n = 4 \)).

**Procedures**

The men were interviewed in their homes or another setting of their choosing (e.g., a private room at a coffee shop, church office or sanctuary). Each interviewee was assured anonymity and strict confidentiality of the data collected. Two married Black males conducted the interviews between January and April 2010. The two interviewers underwent extensive training with the author, learning interviewing techniques and the ethical collection and handling
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of interview data. The author also reviewed study goals, the interview protocol, and the background for each question with the interviewers.

The interviewers and participants were matched on race and gender given the sensitive nature of the questions that were asked of the husbands about their marriages and to help facilitate rapport during the interviews (Cooney, Small, & O’Connor, 2007; McCurdy & Daro, 2001). The men were asked about a range of topics including the meaning of marriage (Hurt, 2013), marital socialization, factors that helped to sustain them in their marriages, opinions about singlehood in the Black community (Hurt, McElroy, Sheats, Landor, & Bryant, in press), and their participation in ProSAAM.

For the present study, data pertaining to the reasons for marrying and the timing of marriage were subject to analyses. In an effort to address gaps in the literature related to the decision to marry among Black men, the following questions were asked: (1) Who or what was the greatest factor in encouraging you to marry your spouse? Why? (2) Who or what was the greatest barrier that you had to overcome in making the decision to marry? Why? (3) If you had to do all over again, would you marry at about the same time in your life, earlier in life, later in life, or not at all? The two interviewers recorded each interview using a digital recorder and the recordings were electronically transferred to a transcriber and transcribed. Upon receipt of the transcripts, undergraduate research interns listened to the recordings and reviewed the transcripts simultaneously to double-check the transcripts for accuracy. The transcripts were used for the data analyses.

The interviewers asked the questions from interview protocol and then followed up as needed to obtain a fuller understanding of the men’s perspectives. When the interviewers sensed that the men could say more about their experiences and offer a more detailed account of their
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perspectives or experiences during the interviews, often relying on non-verbal cues and other observations of the manner in which the respondent answered the question, they frequently encouraged the interviewee to talk more specifically about the issue. The interviewers were trained to ask questions in an open-ended way so that the participants would share their opinions and experiences more fully. This style of interviewing permitted a more holistic understanding of what the participants thought and felt about the issue under study. Nonetheless, in light of the more individualized nature of qualitative inquiry and the semi-structured method of interviewing, the interviewers adapted their line of questioning with the men, re-articulating questions or phrasing them differently to ensure the participants understood what was being asked.

Communication between the author and the interviewers was maintained throughout data collection. The interviewers met semi-monthly in person with the research team and communicated weekly with the author about their progress in the field. Through in-person meetings, emails, phone conversations, and documented reflections on the digital recorders, the interviewers reported important themes and impressions from their field observations. The author and a research assistant regularly checked the interview recordings to make certain that the interviewers were following the interview protocol in their lines of inquiry and were practicing effective interviewing techniques.

Analyses

To be transparent and reflexive, information pertaining to the author’s background is presented (Carlson, 2010). During the analysis phase, the author was an engaged woman but later married. She is native-born American citizen, heterosexual, and highly-educated. She is Black and shares the same racial background as the men who were interviewed. Though her family has roots in the southern part of the United States, she lived in the Midwest in a middle-
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class family was reared by parents who had a high-quality marriage. She shares a similar
religious background with most of the men; 90% of the sample reported attending a Christian-
related worship center.

Over a period of three months, the author analyzed interview data that was collected,
transcribed, and archived. The husbands’ responses to the question of interest were identified
first, and then arranged by individual case and laid out in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Each
row included the respondent’s identification number, the interviewer’s reflections, the duration
of the man’s marriage, a description of the husband’s path to marriage, and the men’s response to
interview questions about motivating factors and barriers that related to their decision to marry
along with the timing of marriage. The author reviewed the full data set, and then selected only
those data that were pertinent to the current analyses thereby conducting data reduction
(Huberman & Miles, 1994).

Next, the author conducted data selection and condensation. She independently
evaluated, compared, and contrasted data across the 52 respondents and developed a list of data
summaries, coding, themes, and clusters that emerged from her review of the data (Huberman &
Miles, 1994). Content analysis was employed in order to closely examine and better understand
the men’s perspectives (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005).
Specifically, she looked at each case alone to examine the background characteristics relative to
the participant’s length of marriage, marital history, age, religion, education, social class, and
family upbringing to identify any life experiences that could explain the men’s responses. In
doing so, the author also reviewed the full interview transcripts to better understand the men’s
life experiences (Huberman & Miles, 1994). The author recorded her self-reflections and
interpretations in exploring the data for themes. She created an audit trail to establish credibility,
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noting her reflections about the transcripts, data themes, data interpretations, and analytic memos to record the process (Carlson, 2010; Huberman & Miles, 1994; Saldaña, 2013). The author grouped men who shared similar experiences about motivating factors and barriers in the decision to marry as well as marital timing (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). The themes emerged from the author’s study of the data over a period of time. The analytical procedures involved iterative sequences of reviewing, categorizing, verifying, and drawing conclusions about the data (Huberman & Miles, 1994).

In the spirit of member-checking, a research assistant was asked to validate themes the author identified in the data. The research assistant was married and Asian; she was not native-born in America nor a Christian. She was asked to review a manuscript draft in which the results were detailed. Previous work has highlighted that member checking is best conducted when a finished product can be reviewed and interpretations are offered for themes (Carlson, 2010). The research assistant was also provided a copy of the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet that summarized the data from the men and the author’s notes about the data analyses. The research assistant carefully reviewed the spreadsheet as well as the results that were outlined in the manuscript and believed that the author had accurately reflected, categorized, and synthesized the men’s perspectives (Creswell, 2007). Next, the study’s results are presented.

Results

The 52 Black men outlined key motivating factors and barriers related to their decision to marry as well as the timing of their marriages. All participants quoted are referred to by pseudonyms to protect their identities. All perspectives shared by the men are included in the results; no data were omitted. Also, the percentages of men grouped within each category are presented; the number of men whose responses reflect each theme is also noted. In some
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instances, the men provided more than one response or example. Therefore, the number of responses may not equal the number of men (expressed as percentage or sample size) within each theme.

The men described the following as factors for encouraging marriage: wife’s characteristics, spirituality, desire to be together, readiness to marry, and encouragement from others. The men also discussed several barriers they overcame in marrying their wives—personal reservations, perceived loss of freedom, disapproval from others, prior relationship experiences, and finances. In the final section, findings pertaining to men’s reflections on whether they would marry at the same time, marry later, or marry earlier are presented. Data are presented without consideration to the men’s marital histories, life histories, or background characteristics like religion, education, family background, occupation, or social class. The author could not identify any differences in the men’s backgrounds to systematically explain the reasons for their responses to the interview questions.

Factors Encouraging Marriage

Each of the factors the men discussed for encouraging marriage to their wives is described next. Two men did not offer a response (no response =1, don’t know =1).

Wife’s characteristics. Thirty-seven percent recalled being inspired to marry because their wives were great women who complemented them as individuals. Thirty-one-year-old Andre recalled, “I just think knowing that when you come together with somebody, there are certain areas in my life that I am deficient in, and I knew that she had those things and I felt like together we can make a solid team.” The men also complimented their wives on the qualities that they exemplified as women (e.g., patient, good mothers, good homemakers, accepting and not
Black men and the decision to marry judgmental, God-fearing). Their wives demonstrated the kind of qualities they desired in a woman (e.g., shared activities, fun, honesty) (n=21). Forty-seven-year-old Evan said:

Just her, the qualities that she possesses, her character, very strong, independent. And I mean, she didn’t need me. She just wanted my attention, but she didn’t need me for any financial gain. She just wanted that companionship. And so, without those strings being attached to the relationship, I think it made [her] more attractive to me.

Fifty-five-year-old Maxwell shared, “I wanted me a good, steady, wholesome woman that didn’t do things [in the street] and I picked her.” In the next section, the men’s reflections on the importance of spirituality are discussed.

**Spirituality.** Among 27% of the men, all (n=14) cited God as the key factor in encouraging marriage to their wives, believing that He led them to their wives. Forty-two-year-old Adam stated, “I mean, I guess I’ve got to say the influence of God. I mean, I can’t really describe it any other way.” Fifty-five-year-old Alexander said, “Like I said, when God puts you together, ain’t nothing you can do about it.” Another respondent, 36-year-old John recalled, “It’s just something that I prayed about. And I don’t know how strong most guys are, meaning their relationship to God, but at that time I felt the time was right. And I felt like He was basically showing me okay, this is the person for you. So are you going to sit by and just let them walk out your life? Or what are you going to do?”

In two other cases, the respondents recalled spiritual encounters. Forty-eight-year-old Alvin described, “I think one of the major reasons was like, I heard God say, ‘It’s time.’ So [after I] received Christ, from that point I did not date, because I couldn’t find dating in the Bible…You know that it’s gonna be an awesome marriage if God puts us together, and that’s what I felt like He was doing.” Forty-eight-year-old Mark described how he was inspired to seek
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marriage within six months after hearing a sermon, saying, “When I met her I was really trying to see God. Okay, God is this it? [I] was at a men’s retreat and so when I went there [the Bishop] basically preached everything that was happening [to me] at the time.” In addition to spirituality, the men also described their desire to be with their wives as a key factor for encouraging marriage.

Desire to be together. For 19% of the men, a desire to be a couple and recognition among the men that they are better individuals with their wives than without them was a significant factor in encouraging marriage (n=9). Xavier, a 46-year-old, stated, “I guess the fact that we really cared for each other and just realizing that [marriage is] where we really wanted to go. There was no reason not to marry. What would hold you back from doing it? We wanted to live our lives together, grow together, and be together.” James remembered his decision to marry saying, “I didn’t want to spend the rest of my life by myself. I wanted to spend the rest of my life with somebody that wants me for me, not for what I can give them. And it worked out.” Forty-seven-year-old James said, “See, she wasn’t about money. It was just about being with somebody, being happy, enjoying each other’s time. That’s the biggest thing that I [saw] about her and that’s what made me want to marry her.” For other men, they simply recalled being ready to marry; these comments are presented next.

Readiness to marry. Another 19% said their decision to marry was influenced by maturing and being mentally prepared for marriage (n=7), legitimating a pregnancy (n=1), being tired of the single life (n=1), and perceiving marriage as a fairy tale (n=1). Fifty-three-year-old Harold recalled how he changed his approach when he met his wife in hopes he would set the foundation for a long-lasting relationship saying,
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I remember us meeting, our first conversation, and me actually laying all of my cards on the table and her accepting me, you know, kind of right then and right there for who I was…I’m going to tell you who I am right now. I ain’t never tried it [reference to being honest and upfront with a potential dating partner]. I tried every other approach, you know, all the slick stuff, but I ain’t never tried that, so I tried honesty and it worked. Malcolm offered this:

I won’t say I convinced myself that I was ready [to marry] but I just matured. I just matured but I was getting weary of [dating different women]. I didn’t have that one complete package in a woman, but I would have this woman that had great conversation, and this one I could hang out with just a little. I got weary, mentally and spiritually. I was at the point that I wanted to move forward. I wanted to have a family, settle down.”

Having completed their educations, settled into their careers, achieved financial stability, or set life goals, other men were ready to establish a family (n=4). Two men expressed their aspirations to be taken care of by their wives, citing their appreciation to have someone to cook them a meal (n=1) and ensure someone was regularly available to maintain the household (n=1). A smaller proportion of other men noted being encouraged to marry from others whose opinions they valued. These data are outlined next.

**Encouragement from others.** Twelve percent of men recalled being encouraged to marry their wives from family members (n=3), spiritual leaders (n=2), and mentors (n=2). In two cases, the men described their parents as being unhappy with them cohabiting with their mates prior to marriage. Of the key factor encouraging him to marry his wife, 31-year-old Andre said, I think it was the community. The people that know me best all agreed that she was the one. My grandmother previously said no to the other girl…and then she met [my wife]
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and she’s like, ‘Oh, I love you.’ My pastor at the time, he met her and he said he knew she was the one so I value a lot the opinions of others, sometimes in an unhealthy way, but often in a positive way.

Two other men (n=2) discussed how mentors modeled being good spouses or counseled them about preparing themselves for marriage. Thirty-nine-year-old Alan talked about his personal journey by sharing the following:

I think my grandfather was a factor about marriage and one of my good friends. [My friend and I] were in college together. We’re fraternity brothers, line brothers, and we played together. [He] got married really early… But to see him give it up….put down all of the stuff that we were doing, you know, and say, “Look man, I’ve got to be a father. I’ve got to be a good husband. I’ve got to be a provider.” To watch him go through this and see him put his family first…before himself was really like, ‘Whoa! Like ok… There are some guys out here who really understand this is the road…’ That was one of the things [he] really encouraged me that cause he was like, “You’re a good person. God ain’t going to send you somebody that will take away from the person that He’s already created. He’s not going to do that.” That was really cool and it was really helpful. I talked to [him] throughout the process of, you know, just like now when we get together, I might call [him] up now and say you know, “Hey man, this is what’s happening with a situation.” We talk like that.

After describing factors that encouraged marriage, the men also spoke about barriers they overcame. These data are summarized next.

**Barriers to Overcome in the Decision to Marry**
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The men noted overcoming several barriers in their decision to marry their wives. These barriers included personal reservations, perceived loss of freedom, disapproval from others, prior relationship experiences, and finances. Within this category, eight men (n=8) cited no barriers in their decision to marry; two of these men (n=2) felt that there were no barriers because their marriages to their wives were God-ordained. Next, data on the men’s personal reservations is discussed.

**Personal reservations.** Twenty-seven percent of the men listed themselves as the barrier to marriage. Three men (n=3) did not explain what aspect about themselves was not ready for marriage. One man recalled being content with his single life (n=1) while another specifically noted his need to mature prior to marriage (n=1). Forty-one-year-old Kyle reflected on his journey saying, “Some of the issues with trust, some of my lifestyle before the change. I knew I loved this woman. I wasn’t really sure I trusted her, or me, but I knew I loved this woman and I was willing to try.”

Other men recalled readying themselves for the commitment that marriage required (n=4). Thirty-seven-year-old Quinn shared, “Probably myself… Was I ready for this cause it’s a real big commitment, you know, it’s not going out and buying a car, you know. It’s something that you really have to be ready for, you know.” The permanency of marriage also weighed on the mind of 37-year-old William. He stated,

> Just my belief in marriage. Because I believe it was for life. It was okay, ‘Are you ready to be with this one person for the rest of your life? For the rest of your life?’ And that was you know, it’s like in the Outkast [song], Ms. Jackson for ever, ever? Ever, ever? (Laughter) [Reference to lyrics from the song titled, “Ms. Jackson” by the rap group Outkast]. Just getting over that forever, ever.
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Other men (n=5) recalled confronting their fear of marrying. Sixty-year-old Warren said, “There’s a fear in every man when it comes to that. There’s a little fear in every man.” Thirty-seven-year-old Cedric prayed about his fears prior to deciding to marry his wife. He recalled, “I just had to talk to God for a while, to make sure I felt like [she was] the woman that God wanted me to marry…So, the barrier seemed to be just this fear in and of itself. What if this is not the right person?” In the next section, men’s perceptions of lost freedom in marriage is described.

**Perceived loss of freedom.** Twenty-three percent of the men cited the perceived loss of freedom to engage in certain activities as barriers to marrying; desired activities included using drugs (n=3) (e.g., marijuana, crack) and socializing with friends (n=2). Thirty-nine-year-old Brett shared, “I always thought it was like losing your friends, to the point when you get married you ain’t going to be out and hang with the fellas. [But] I knew that getting married would be a good thing for me. Because of the type of person she was.” Most men in this category (n=7) focused on the lost opportunity to date and interact with other available women with the decision to marry. Forty-four-year-old Mark recalled needing to end his romantic ties to other women. He said: “My other girlfriends [were a barrier], ‘cause I was a popular guy or whatever and I guess that’s the biggest hurdle I had to overcome. You know, we had been together and knew each other and what not, [but] there were still other ladies, you know. So you just had to eliminate that.” Malcolm shared a similar perspective. Of the barrier to marriage for him, he said,

> Just the thought that this was going to be the last woman I date for the rest of my life. You know, yeah, ‘cause I mean, like I said, I had a lot of opportunities in my past, you know. A lot of times popularity is like a gift and a curse because with popularity comes a lot of opportunities. I guess, just the thought of not being to act on those opportunities anymore was probably the biggest barrier I had.
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Though perceived loss of freedom was a significant barrier for some men, a smaller proportion of other men described how disapproval from others influenced the men’s decisions to marry. These data are reviewed next.

**Disapproval from others.** Thirteen percent of the men recalled disapproval of their marriage to their wives from their family members (n=4) as a barrier. Adam shared, “My mother. She did not approve at all. She thought that my wife was trying to use me to take care of her and her five children. And she believed it so much she didn’t come to the wedding.” Perry, a 43-year-old, also recounted troubles with his mother:

My mother, cause she didn’t see no good in [my wife]. She told me my wife didn’t even want me. She wanted to use me. And then she [threw] me out cause I bet she hated me cause I stayed with my wife until I got married. And I didn’t want to do that [reference to living with his wife before marriage] but I had nowhere to go.

Forty-seven-year-old Dennis reflected on the challenges he experienced his with his in-laws at the time of marriage saying,

They did anything that [they] could do [to] stop us and we fought it. I explained to them what kind of man I was and what background I come from and what I believe and I didn’t believe in disrespecting elderly people but it came to the point where we fussed, said bad words and physically fought. Cause I told them, and I meant this. I wasn’t henpecked. I’m a man and I wasn’t going to just let no woman just run over me and I wasn’t going to be disrespectful to no woman myself. The word we used “henpecked” and I thought a lot about how a lot of the men were being treated by their wives on that side. And I told them flatfoot I wasn’t going to have it.
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Other disapproval came from friends (n=1); Evan recalled his male friends not supporting his decision to marry saying,

All my boys, they was like, “Man, don’t do that, no, no.” My house was like party capital, you know. They had keys. They could get in, and I’d come home sometimes from school and it’d be a party going on. So they didn’t want to hear the whole get married thing… And then when they find out who it was, you know, they were like, “Oh man, you don’t want to do that.” After they knew what type of young lady she was [reference to a non-partying type], they were like, “Man, don’t do it.”

Recounting the time when he and his wife sought premarital counseling, a marriage counselor was also cited as a barrier to marriage (n=1). Andre said:

I would say the counselor who told us, “You guys are not ready.” And I told her, I said, “I want you to know I respect you as an elder of the church and I appreciate your counsel and under normal circumstances I think that’s right.” I said, “But there’s a community of people around us that says otherwise and I feel good about this myself.” And so we went for it.

For Richard, a 27-year-old, naysayers (n=1) expressed disapproval of his marriage when he married five years prior. He said,

That’s about all I heard. I heard the negatives. “Oh, you shouldn’t get married, you just too young.” Or, “Woman folk don’t like you and blah blah this and blah blah that.” [I went on and got married thinking,] if it ended up being a bumpy ride, it just have to be a bumpy ride.

In one final, unique, case, 36-year-old Tracey recalled considering whether his wife’s former husband would disapprove of their marriage. He recalled: “Making sure her ex-husband was
okay with it, I mean, because she was already going through the divorce. We got married the same day she got divorced. Everything happened in one day.” While disapproval from others was a key barrier for some men, other men discussed the significance of prior relationship experiences as a barrier. These data are reviewed next.

**Prior relationship experiences.** Ten percent of the respondents cited prior relationship experiences as a challenge to overcome in their decision to marry. John recalled the constant challenge of remembering that his first wife and second wife were two different individuals saying, “I had to basically separate the thought that ‘Ok, her train of thought is not like hers.’” James was also apprehensive about marrying a second time: “I was real skeptical.” The importance of triumphing over past relationship troubles was addressed in one case. Forty-four-year-old Greg offered this reflection of his experiences:

Some of my baggage from the past to really trust her and then knowing that she had had baggage from her past relationships. In fact, we had a talk. I just sort of spelled those things out to her that, you know, she wasn’t able to get past certain things, and then, you know, I know if we go any further, that was a real turning point for us both. Because we recognize that we really wanted to go further so we honestly took a look at things that could have really held us back.

Next, data related to finances is presented.

**Finances.** Among 8% of men, finances were cited as a barrier. These men (n=4) recalled questioning whether they had enough resources to marry; their responses focused on cash flow and securing a residence for them and their wives, specifically. Michael, who was 49-years-old, shared, “Probably the greatest barrier I had to overcome is that we was gonna have some
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challenge financially being in school and being able to survive, but again our love and our faith overruled all of that you know.” Alvin offered this:

   I think, you know, cause if, you know, as a man that you’re gonna get married, “Hey, you need to have, first of all, you need to have your job, you need to have the money coming in. You need to be set, you know, have the house or at least know how you’re gonna get the apartment and everything, and none of that was happening with me.”

   Thomas, a 47-year-old, also stated concern with his ability to set-up an independent household saying, “Before we got married, I tried to get somewhere on our own to live, and that was a big factor at the time, you know, but we made it work.” Forty-three-year-old Alex noted, Well, like anything else, do we have enough financial resources between the two of us to make this work and still live comfortably? We were both single people, took care of our own situations, bills and so forth, and now how do we combine this together and still be able to live day-by-day but still have some left over as they say?

In the final section, data pertaining to the men’s opinions of whether they would choose to marry at the same time or a different time in their lives is presented.

**Marry at the same time, later, or earlier?**

   Three men noted that they would not marry again, if given the opportunity. Of these three men, two men noted that they would be content to live by themselves, and one man conceded that marriage is hard for him, particularly as it relates to resisting affection from other women. All three men, though, reported being currently happy in their marriages. Next, data from other men is presented on whether they would marry at the same time, earlier in life, or later in life.
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**Marry at the same time.** Forty-four percent of the men reported that they would marry at the same time in their lives, if they had to make the choice to marry again. Of his decision to marry, 53-year-old Scott shared this:

> I think we married around the same but the right time. We both were about twenty-five, twenty-six so we were not young when we got married, you know. I had finished college and, you know, pursuing my career in the military, so it came about the right time. I think if I had to go back and do it again, probably be around the same time.

Evan noted now his experiences in the military helped him prepare for marriage. He said,

> Exactly the same way. When I had an opportunity to be in the military, I had an opportunity to go see new places and get some of that craziness out of my system. I think had I not experienced the military chapter in my life, you know, not being exposed to some things, I probably wouldn’t have been ready to get married. I think that forced me to mature and change my perspective of that life and having things, you know. I saw a lot of young marriages within the military; those guys were doing very well and it’s like wow, you know. It could get worse but again people were all of exceptional character because the dealing with, you know, military aspect of marriage makes it very tough.

> When you don’t have strong character, then, you know, it won’t work.

For another husband, 48-year-old Andrew, he reflected in this way:

> Well, if I had the wisdom I had now earlier (laughter)…I probably would have just did the same thing. I still would have waited until I felt God said it was time. I’d say about the same time.

While some men would opt to marry at the same time, one-third of men stated that they would choose to marry later. Next, the men’s reflections on this point are reviewed.
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**Marry later.** Another 30% of men stated that they would marry their wives later if given another opportunity. Among the men, some provided no reason for their decision (n=4). Others noted that they would have desired to be more established in their careers before marrying (n=3) and earn more money to contribute to the household (n=2). Phillip, a 55-year-old, noted this:

I would marry the same way I did before, but a lot later. I would be more established in life, you know. Be more stable and working and, you know, providing for my family, you know, that kind of thing and I think that’s a what makes a good husband is providing for your family and make sure all is well.

Forty-year-old Milton shared his experience as well:

When we first got married, I was finishing up grad school and it was my last semester; I started working on my thesis when my wife and I got married. I told her, you know, what I was dealing with, warned her how my life was going to be in that last year. She was a champ dealing with it. But [when] I look back at my life, it’s like when I finished school, I had a lot of opportunities that I had to let go because I was a newly married couple and those opportunities were to go overseas, to work at companies as [a motion picture professional], and I had to forgo those opportunities and I wish I would have had those opportunities. I mean I wish I would have had that five-year span when I finished school to just dive a little bit more into my career to do those things. It wasn’t where [I could] take the whole family. It was, you could go for seven or eight months, and then you come back and my wife just wasn’t hearing it. We just got married. She’s like, ‘No, it’s not going to happen.’ So, all my buddies I went to grad school with, you know, they had the opportunity to do that and, you know, they would always come back and say, ‘Man, I had
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a great time. They spent a year in [another country] working on a movie over there, a
year in [another state] working on a movie. They were working on different films and
like it was wonderful, and I just couldn’t do that.

Five men (n=5) conceded that they were too anxious to marry their wives and the marriage
would have benefitted from each spouse having more time to date one another and work through
personal issues. Fifty-three-year-old Armstead offered,

I would marry probably a little later. I think we could have stretched the dating process a
little bit longer. You know what I’m saying. I’m not going to sit here and tell you now
it’s been all easy. Cause, you know, I struggle in certain areas and I have my downfalls
and but one thing I can say is that I would marry this woman here any time, over again,
cause she’s been my support even when I do fall short, you know, what I’m saying she
doesn’t criticize me, she lifts me up. You know what I mean?

In another example, 47-year-old Michael reflected on his journey saying,

I probably would have married a little bit later. For personal reasons like finances.
I started at [place of employment]. When I met her, and one year after that I went to
[city], then, we [were] already in the process of being engaged. In my earlier years, I
made lots of money but I didn’t handle it right. My first five years or marriage, just
wasting money.

Thirty-four-year-old Calvin confessed this:

Later. Later in life. Later in life, just so that I could have gotten all of that crap out of
my system, and you know, I wouldn’t have to feel that kind of shame and hurt and
embarrassment that I feel and that I put her through, you know, just because of my own
issues and insecurities and desires or whatever, so that’s the only reason for later.
In the final section, data from men who would prefer to marry earlier is discussed.

**Marry earlier.** Twenty-three percent of the men were certain that they would marry earlier in their lives, if given the chance. Two men (n=2) did not offer any reason for their responses. Two men (n=2) believed that they dated their wives too long. Alan stated,

If I could marry the same person about two years earlier I would. If it would be [my wife] instead of six years of dating, it could have been four, cause the last two years of dating, I mean, I knew sort of that if I don’t marry her, you know… [implies his wife would have ended the relationship and moved on.] It’s not too many women out here that’s like the one I’ve met that God’s brought to me, you know. So I know He sent her cause if she can put up with me then I know He sent her.

Thirty-two-year-old Daniel asserted,

Earlier in life because what I have now is something great. One thing about it is we still look at [the beauty of our marriage] from a distance. And she is willing to do all she can for the marriage. The greatest thing in this marriage is that we are willing to do all we can.

Reflecting on the quality of his relationship, 32-year-old Hank wished that he had met his wife sooner (n=1). He said:

Probably a little bit earlier, just a little bit. Not much just a little bit earlier because now looking back on it I realize how much time I wasted you know on certain people and I really didn’t need that, you know. Once those experiences with those different women started to look like the same experience, it was just a waste time. I definitely could, you know, have done you know without all of them in the first place… Once I realized what
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was gonna work, then like I say, I knew what type of woman I kind of wanted so I could have [sought] her out a little sooner.

Three men (n=3) desired to marry earlier because they held the perception that they married and started their families later in life relative to their peers. Of his desire to marry earlier, 44-year-old Cary shared:

Oh, because I feel like a late bloomer now because she’s 29, I’m 44 and she’s got her career and I’m stuck right now. I’m laid off from work. So I feel like if I would have did it a lot earlier, I don’t know maybe we would have just got a bunch of stuff and lost it again anyway, you know, just because of what we’ve been through lately.

One man said that he would have married his wife earlier to prevent the hardships she experienced in life. Adam noted, “If it was with her earlier, I know some things in her life occurred right before we met and if we had met earlier, those things would not have happened.”

In 57-year-old Ward’s commentary, he lamented not working with his wife harder to prepare her for marriage saying,

With the knowledge I have now, I would probably have started earlier and tried to be more diligent. But I think I would have known better how to build the foundation, what to look for in the choices I’ve made. One of the things I’ve said to [my wife] is I’m not sure you’re my wife. And one of the basic reasons for that is I have never been her number one priority.

In reflecting on his life, 45-year-old Rodney said,

Earlier. Cause if I hadn’t have left when she was at home with my mama, and [I] started dating the other lady, moved from [home city] to [current city], got to selling drugs, thought I was in love with her, and she started messing around with a guy that I was
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selling dope for, and I found out. That’s how I started smoking crack… I’ve lost quite a few jobs, during those years of drug addiction. Some that I wish I could walk right back in there now. I would have [married] her when she got pregnant. [Reference to a period of time in his life before he chose to begin dating another women, moved away from his hometown, and experimented with drugs.]

A summary of the qualitative results are presented in Table 2. In the next section, the current study’s findings are discussed in the context of previous research.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this descriptive study was to explore the decision to marry among a sample of 52 married Black men. Qualitative interviews were conducted to better document the subtle differences in the men’s decisions to marry and capture the men’s experiences in their own voices, which have been overlooked in previous investigations (Marks et al., 2005; Michael & Tuma, 1985). This investigation supports earlier findings from key studies and also extends our understanding about factors involved in the decision to marry among Black men.

This study’s findings underscores the importance of love in the decision to marry, as 37% of the sample noted that they married because their wives complemented them well and embodied characteristics that were attractive to them (Coontz, 2005; Lawson & Thompson, 1999; Oppenheimer, 1998; South, 1993). Another 19% of the sample recalled the desire to be with their wives in their decision to marry. The men’s comments reflect upon common themes in friendship-based love and romantic love. Grote and Frieze (1994) define friendship-based love as “a comfortable, affectionate, trusting love for a likable partner, based on a deep sense of friendship and involving companionship and the enjoyment of common activities, mutual interests, and shared laughter” (p. 275). Romantic love, on the other hand, involves more
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passion. As defined by Sternberg (2004), romantic love comprises intimate and passionate components of love. Those experiencing romantic love are physically attracted to one another and bonded emotionally as well. Love, as noted by Noller (1996), is significant in considering close relationships and encourages not only satisfaction but also healthy family relationships and stability. In addition, the significance of spouses being able to meet each other’s psychological and social needs in contemporary marriages has been emphasized in previous work (Coontz, 2005; Lamanna & Riedmann, 2012). Nock (1998) has also observed that regardless of race, most men benefit from the support that their wives offer to them.

Spirituality was also noted as a key factor for encouraging marriage among 27% of the men. Religiously-oriented persons are likely to view their marriages through a spiritual lens (Hopkins-Williams, 2007). Moreover, religious affiliation has been found to promote marital formation (Call, 1977; King & South, 2011; Otto, 1979; Voss, 1975). The men’s perspectives that their marriages were a blessing to their lives were shaped by their religious beliefs and spirituality (Fincham et al., 2007; Hopkins-Williams, 2007; Hurt, 2013; Mahoney, Pargarment, Murray-Swank, & Murray-Swank, 2003; Nock, 1998). The viewpoint that marriage was a gift from God probably aided in setting a firm base for the men’s dedication to their wives (Lambert & Dollahite, 2008; Marks, 2005; Stanley & Markman, 1992). Indeed, previous work outlines the importance of spirituality and religion in intimate relationships among Blacks, in particular (Chatters, et al., 1999; Dainton, 1999; Hopkins-Williams, 2007; Hunt & Hunt, 2001; Hurt, 2013; LaTaillade, 2006; Pew Charitable Trust, 2009; Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004).

Another 19% of men spoke of their readiness to marry as the primary factor encouraging marriage to their wives. Their reflections centered on the importance of individual development, maturity, and favorable perceptions about the benefits of marriage in the decision to marry.
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These findings have been corroborated in earlier work (Hill, 2004; King & South, 2011; Lawson & Thompson, 1999; Otto, 1979; South, 1993; Voss, 1975). Previous work has noted the importance of men achieving specific milestones (e.g., working a steady job, securing financial assets) prior to deciding to marry (Edin, 2000; Goldscheider & Waite, 1986; Holman & Li, 1997; Schneider, 2011). Individual development also proved to be a key obstacle for the men as they reflected upon the decision to marry (e.g., 27% personal reservations, 23% perceived loss of freedom, 10% prior relationship experiences). Lack of preparedness for marriage in these areas was noted as barriers among the men. This finding has been highlighted in earlier work (Becker, 1973; Keeley, 1977; King & South, 2011; Lawson & Thompson, 1999; Modell, 1980; Otto, 1979; South, 1993; Voss, 1975). The men recalled being ready for the kind of commitment that marriage requires and a desire to begin a family with a spouse after having an opportunity to experience life and overcome their reservations about marriage (e.g., perceived loss of freedom, reduced availability of sex partners, limited opportunities to socialize with peers) (Anderson, 1999; South, 1993).

Encouragement and support from family, close friends, and mentors was also regarded as a key factor in the decision to marry for 12% of men. Strong ties to kin have been underscored in previous work as a key factor to consider in marital formation. Close relationships with extended family and allegiance to the family unit can promote the likelihood of marriage (Brown, Perry, & Harburg, 1977; Hatchett, Veroff, & Douvan, 1995; Sassler & Goldscheider, 2004). Extended family networks are very significant sources of social support for individuals, especially among Blacks (Chatters, Taylor, & Jayakody, 1994). Conversely, these close ties could also dissuade someone from marrying or serve as a barrier to marriage, as was stated among 13% of the men.
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These findings corroborate previous empirical and theoretical work which points to the influential role of social networks on the course of a couple’s relationship (Bryant, Conger, & Meehan, 2001; Sprecher, 2010).

A small proportion of men (8%) cited finances as a barrier to marriage. Previous work has placed a much stronger emphasis on the role of economics (Browning, 1999; Clayton & Moore, 2003; Edin, 2000; Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005; King & Allen, 2007; Lawson & Thompson, 1999; Lloyd & South, 1996; Marks et al., 2008; Smock, Manning, & Porter, 2005). Indeed, finances was a barrier to marriage but was not cited among most men as a significant obstacle in the decision to marry. This could be attributable to the fact that the study employs a middle-class sample rather than a group of low-income men. Among the men, finances are described as a component of an overall readiness to marry.

Overall, most men said that they would choose to marry at the same time in their lives (44%), followed by marry later (30%) and marry earlier in life (23%). Among those who would marry at the same time in their lives, the men stressed the importance of achieving economic and professional milestones, experiencing life, and waiting for God to send them a wife (Lawson & Thompson, 1999). Among the 33% who would select to marry earlier in life noted that they dated their wives too long or started their families too late in life. For 30% who would marry later, they noted that they would desire to be more established professionally and financially, as well as have more time to date their wives or work through personal challenges. Only 3% reported that they would choose to remain single and not marry, if given another opportunity.

Several study limitations are notable. First, the findings may not represent the perspectives of Black men living in different locales in the United States; those living in the South have been found to be more family-focused and marry earlier and more often than other
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Second, these results may not apply to Black men of other ethnic group backgrounds, Black men with varying relationship preferences, or Black men of dissimilar spiritual or religious orientations. Third, the sample could be described as nonrandom. Fourth, the sample is inclusive of men who are very committed to marriage, and their attitudes and values reflect this orientation. Fifth, most respondents had earned a high school diploma and began some postsecondary education or training; these experiences may have aided the men’s preparation for marriage (Koball, 1998; Marks et al., 2008; Marks et al., 2010; Oppenheimer, 2003). Sixth, though the sample was recruited from a part of the Bible Belt, religious participation was not a condition required for recruitment and so one cannot assume that all men were highly religious (Beach, Hurt, Fincham, Franklin, McNair, & Stanley, 2011; Hurt, 2013). Seventh, the men were only interviewed one time. Collecting data at additional time points could provide more insight to explain the men’s decisions to marry.

Conclusions and Implications

As scholars seek to better understand decisions to marry among Blacks, it is critical to consider the perspectives and the voices of Black men, who unfortunately have been often ignored in previous work. This study advances the literature by capturing the reflections of married Black men, an understudied population (Marks, Nesteruk, Swanson, Garrison, & Davis, 2005; Michael & Tuma, 1985). These men’s personal testimonies about significant factors that fostered and inhibited their decisions to marry as well as the timing of their marriages could be useful in reaching other Black men in programs designed to encourage marriage or strengthen marital relationships (Marks, et al., 2008). As indicated by Hurt (2013), professionals can aid young Black men who may be in the early phases of relationship development in helping them to understand rewards and costs involved in the decision to marry. Often times, married Black men
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express their thoughts using language that may be more effective in communicating meaning to younger Black men. Moreover, earlier studies have also underscored the benefits of situating relationship enhancement messages in religious or spiritual contexts (Beach, Fin cham, Hurt, McNair, & Stanley, 2008; Hurt, Franklin, Beach, Murry, Brody, & McNair, 2006; Hurt, 2013). As such, there is value in building bridges between family scholars and spiritual groups. In sum, these insights could be especially helpful in creating culturally-sensitive public relations campaigns and revising current marital and relationship curricula.

From a conceptual perspective, these findings advance our understanding of how a sample of Black men may define, view, and describe different rewards (e.g., wife’s characteristics, spirituality, readiness to marry) and costs (e.g., personal reservations, perceived loss of freedom, disapproval from others) in their decisions to marry. Scholars have called for more attention to nuances in the decision to marry among an understudied population like Black men (Lawson & Thompson, 1999; Oppenheimer, Kalmijn, & Lim, 1997; Teachman, Polonko, & Leigh, 1987). Moreover, family scientists can benefit from these results that provide a finer understanding of the factors that encourage and discourage marriage and the opinions about whether the men’s marriages were timely or not. These insights can be particularly beneficial in informing future studies on marital formation.
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Table 1.  
*A Comparison of Reasons for Marrying One’s Wife Across Four Waves of Survey Data*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Choices</th>
<th>Pre-test</th>
<th>Post-test</th>
<th>Six-month Follow-up</th>
<th>Twelve-month Follow-up</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I was in love with her.</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It was discovered that she was pregnant with my child.</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I needed her support with raising children, making ends meet, etc.</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I did not want to be alone and was ready to have my mate as my spouse.</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wanted to leave or escape from my parents’/caregivers’ home.</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wanted to be an adult.</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I felt it was the right time.</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We had known each other a long time.</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other reasons (not specified)</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Table 2.

*Summary of Themes From Qualitative Analyses (n=52)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors encouraging marriage to wives*</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wife’s characteristics</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to be together</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Readiness to marry</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouragement from others</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response/don’t know</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barriers to overcome in the decision to marry*</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal reservations</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived loss of freedom</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disapproval from others</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior relationship experiences</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finances</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No barriers</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marry at the same time, later, or earlier?</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marry at the same time</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marry later</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marry earlier</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would choose not to marry again</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Note: Percentages may not sum to 100% as men may have provided more than one response.