Black Men and Marriage: Is the Glass Half Empty or Half Full?

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Black Men and Marriage: Is the Glass Half Empty or Half Full?

Abstract
To date, a number of scholars have focused on understanding Black men’s retreat from marriage, rather than focusing on those who have succeeded in marriage. According to recent estimates, one-third of Black men in the U.S. were married; this proportion is fewer than Hispanics (44%), Whites (53%), and Asians (58%), as reported by the United States Census Bureau in 2014. Cultivating strong marital relationships is important because marriages impact physical, psychological, emotional, and financial well-being as well as children's developmental outcomes. Thus, disparities in marital formation and stability could negatively impact individual, child, and family well-being (Bryant & Wickrama, 2005).

Disciplines
African American Studies | Family, Life Course, and Society | Place and Environment | Race and Ethnicity | Sociology of Culture | Theory, Knowledge and Science

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Black Men and Marriage: Is the Glass Half Empty or Half Full?

To date, a number of scholars have focused on understanding Black men’s retreat from marriage, rather than focusing on those who have succeeded in marriage. According to recent estimates, one-third of Black men in the U.S. were married; this proportion is fewer than Hispanics (44%), Whites (53%), and Asians (58%), as reported by the United States Census Bureau in 2014. Cultivating strong marital relationships is important because marriages impact physical, psychological, emotional, and financial well-being as well as children’s developmental outcomes. Thus, disparities in marital formation and stability could negatively impact individual, child, and family well-being (Bryant & Wickrama, 2005).

I propose research focusing on the marriages of the one-third of Black men who do marry and their views of marriage. Identifying the strengths of these men’s marriages, rather than focusing on reasons Black men do not marry, could reveal strategies that they use to prepare for and sustain their unions. Such an approach, if communicated to other Black males, could encourage marriage among them and teach younger generations positive values of marriage, as I suggested in “Toward a Deeper Understanding of the Meaning of Marriage Among Black Men” in the Journal of Family Issues, 2013. Since the voices of Black men are largely absent from the marital literature, I urge scholars and practitioners to increase their efforts
to include Black men in research and programming designed to strengthen marriages, couple relationships, and families (Marks, Hopkins-Williams, Chaney, Nesteruk, & Sasser, 2010).

**The Benefits of Marriage to Black Men**

In 2008, Steven Nock noted that marriage is a significant transition in adulthood for men. However, since men are likely to be impacted by marriage differently than women, it is important to study the two genders separately. Moreover, according to a comprehensive literature review conducted by Lorraine Blackman and colleagues in 2005, marriage provides Black men with enhanced outcomes relative to physical, psychological, and financial well-being. Findings published in the aforementioned *Journal of Family Issues* article underscore these positive effects for psychological and individual well-being. Using a sample of 52 married Black men, I found that husbands credited their marriages with providing them secure emotional support, lifelong commitment, enhanced life success, and secure attachment (Hurt, 2013).

**Influences on Marriage Among Black Men**

Black men’s marital aspirations often begin with gaining a deep respect for marriage from their families. Although marriage has declined in the Black community over time, adults continue to value it. Valuing marriage begins in childhood. Developmental perspectives underscore the importance of parents and
caregivers in the relationship socialization of children. Links among family
structure, the quality of family of origin relationships, and the likelihood of
marriage in adulthood have been well-established. Encouragement of marriage by
extended family members may also be key in promoting it among Blacks.

In addition to family, religion may positively influence a person’s desire to
marry. It is well-known that Blacks are significantly more religious than the
general population, and that many faith communities and religious doctrines
courage marriage. The results from my own research program revealed that the
meaning Black men attach to marriage is related to their individual faith (Hurt,
2013). Other findings published by Brown, Orbuch, and Buermeister in 2008 also
underscore the importance of religion and attending religious services for married
Black couples.

Black men are likely to marry after they achieve developmental milestones
such as finishing postsecondary education or training, securing a well-paying job,
and establishing a household. Because incarceration has been found to be
negatively associated with marriage, avoiding crime is also important for those
aspiring to marry. Unfortunately, Black men are disproportionately affected by
inequalities in education, employment, and incarceration. These disparities, in
addition to the deep-rooted consequences of slavery that influenced Black family
patterns, and ongoing contemporary incidents of racism and discrimination, often
So, why do Black men get married? I recently examined reasons Black men decided to marry (Hurt, 2014). Drawing on in-depth qualitative data from my sample of married Black men as to why they made this decision, I sought to understand factors that encouraged and discouraged their entering marriage. My goal was to describe elements of their marital experiences that might be unique and highlight factors that had been previously overlooked in other studies. These men reflected on their wives’ characteristics as a key reason for choosing to marry them. For example, one 47-year-old husband, shared, “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.” Other men commented on the importance of spirituality, the desire to be together, readiness to marry, and encouragement from others to do so. The men recalled overcoming personal reservations, perceived loss of freedom, disapproval from others, prior
relationship challenges, and financial issues in deciding to marry. They were also asked to reflect on whether their marriages were well-timed or not. Almost 70% were either happy that they had married when they did or would have preferred to have entered marriage even earlier in life. However, in retrospect, nearly one-third would have chosen to marry later; only three men would have preferred not to have married at all. In their reflections, the men discussed the importance of securing jobs and housing, finishing their education or training, and appreciating time to develop as an adult as having bearing on their marriages and decisions to marry. This study advances the literature by using married Black men’s voices to highlight subtle variations in their decisions to marry and understand key factors that were important to them in marrying their wives.

Implications

Findings from research on married Black men will help professionals refine marriage-strengthening programs and approaches, and foster marital formation and stability among Blacks. For example, men’s personal testimonies as to the value and benefits of marriage could be useful in influencing other Black men. Married Black men’s voices and experiences could inspire other Black men regarding the viability of marriage and provide insight not only into the benefits of marriage but also on the steps that they took to prepare themselves to be husbands. In addition, the experiences of married Black men, if personally shared in community-based
marriage preparation or enrichment programs, could be effective in conveying meaning to Black men who are starting their marital relationship journeys or are experiencing marital distress. Developing partnerships among married Black men and encouraging their involvement in marriage and relationship enrichment programs could help ensure cultural sensitivity in intervention approaches. This could positively impact recruitment and engagement as well as the willingness of participants to apply skills and strategies to their lives.

Developing partnerships with groups that commonly include predominantly Black male membership or involvement (e.g., churches, fraternities and masonic chapters, barber shops, etc.) would be consistent with a community-based participatory approach to marriage enrichment. Such partnerships would create opportunities for lay leaders and residents to engage with scholars and practitioners in initiatives focused on strengthening families, and, in turn, Black communities. Community members could play a critical role in ensuring that marriage professionals are aware of the subtleties of local norms and values relative to marriage.

Lastly, because Black men are likely to marry after attaining key milestones in adulthood (e.g., attaining a job, education, housing), continuing to address disparities in these areas is critical, in order to enable these men to marry and succeed in their marriages. Researchers should continue to collaborate with
policymakers to address inequities in employment, education, housing, and incarceration of Black men as a means to address the marriage rate among Blacks. Sustained attention to ways to mitigate these barriers will be key to supporting existing marriages and encouraging new unions.

Acknowledgements

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Selected References


