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"All the Single Ladies:" Single College-Educated Black Women's Perceptions of Marriage and Intimate Relationships

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"All the Single Ladies:" Single College-Educated Black Women's Perceptions of Marriage and Intimate relationships

By

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This thesis has been examined and approved by the following members of the student's committee.

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Professor Barbara Carson, Ph.D.

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Abstract

This project, ""All the Single Ladies:" Single College-Educated Black Women's Perception of Marriage and Intimate Relationships," is an exploratory study that gathers single heterosexual college-educated Black women's perceptions of intimate relationships. Using semi-structured interviews, the women disclosed how their family structure, career and education goals, race, location and standards influence their perceptions of forming and obtaining intimate relationships. This particular cohort of women brings an interesting perspective, as they have experience in higher education and as career women, but maintain a "single" marital status. This research was done because there was a deficit in the research on Black women's perceptions of intimate relationships as compared to White women's. The goal of this study was to further understand the value single, college-educated Black women place on marriage and what hinders and influences their perceptions.

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INTRODUCTION

The study of intimate relationships involving single Black women who have

attained a college education is complex and deserves observation and analyzing.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 66.7 percent of Black women are single compared

to 44.3 percent of White women and 60.6 percent of Black men (2010). This number

includes women who are age 15 or older and are widowed, divorced, or never married.

This study will focus on Black women who have achieved a college education. The U.S.

Census Bureau indicated that in 2010, 21.4 percent of women who identify as Black in

the United States achieved at least a Bachelor's degree or more, compared to 29.9 percent

of White women and 17.7 percent of Black men and 30.8 percent of White men (2012).

This exploratory study seeks to understand perceptions regarding marriage held by

heterosexual Black women who are both college-educated and single.

For this study I have decided to use participants who identify as heterosexual.

Since this study is based on thoughts of marriage, it was most appropriate to use

heterosexual women because there are still several states that do not allow same-sex

marriage, thus the decision about marriage could already be made for someone who is not

willing to marry someone of the opposite sex. Due to cultural and marital belief

differences amongst the varying ethnicities that may be categorized as Black, this study

will be restricted to Black women who are at least third generation American-born. In

other words, at minimum the participants' grandparents must have been born in the

United States. I restricted this study to third generation American-born because of the

possibility of strong religious or cultural influences that could result in minimal reflection

from the participants. Additionally, these women will be able to reflect more on their American culture and experiences and not from their ancestral land. In this study I have deemed college-educated as a person that is at minimum in their final semester of a bachelor program at a college or university. To be defined as single in this study, the participant cannot be married or separated, which means participants currently in a relationship and/or with children will be included.

This qualitative research using in-depth interviews, seeks to answer the following questions: do single, heterosexual, college-educated Black women desire marriage, and if so, what factors are keeping them from doing so? Are members of this cohort choosing to be single or are they searching for Mr. Right before they settle down? By analyzing educational and career accomplishments, family marital trends, personal and professional goals, and mate selection, results of the research will provide a descriptive understanding of college-educated Black women's attitudes and decisions pertaining to marriage. Additionally, I seek to discover how this particular group handles singlehood and the concerns (if any) they have about their lives in regards to intimate relationships.

American society has always placed an expectation on women to marry, and that norm was quite influential in deciding to do this study, particularly as it pertained to a specific group of Black women. As a single, college-educated, Black woman, I was curious if marriage was a desire for women who had similar lifestyles as me. My thoughts about marriage would be considered non-traditional compared to societal norms, but I wanted to grasp the thoughts of others like me. I was starting to read more and more articles and blogs that sought answers as to why college-educated Black women were not

marrying as expected. While reading these articles I started to wonder if getting married was an aspiration of this group and how they perceived it as a life goal. I wanted to know what influenced their thoughts on marriage and what their expectations were in terms of partnership. This study will hopefully provide added perspective to those highly sought after questions regarding single, heterosexual, college-educated Black women and how they perceive marriage and intimate relationships.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A number of studies about the trends of Black women and their marital status have already been done, but not all have focused on Black women who are college-educated. A review of literature captures key research that has already been done on heterosexual relationships and marriages among Black women and men. I will expand on that research by keeping this study focused on college-educated Black women.

Black Women's Perception of Black men and Employment

Black women who desire to marry within their own race are faced with a number of limitations that may prevent them from doing so. A primary restriction is the lack of "marriageable" Black men. King and Allen (2009) define a marriageable man as someone who meets a woman's expected educational and occupational standards. They further explain that professional Black women in particular seek, "…someone who is educated and financially self-sufficient and who shares comparable values – in other words, someone like themselves," (King and Allen 2009:573). Their research exposes the notion that professional Black women look for men that are of similar socioeconomic status as them. Dixon (1998) however, studied Black women's thoughts of Black men in relation to employment. She found that Black women face frustrations with Black men not having sufficient employment and work ethic. One woman from her research said, "…while we are out working one or two jobs and/or going to school our men are at home 'chillin' after working one job," (Dixon 1998: 498). This noted part of Dixon's research shows how some Black women feel they are taking a much greater initiative to be providers in the family than the Black men they are involved with.

It has been said that Black men are at a disadvantage in terms of employment because of their race. Dixon's (1998) participants talked about Black men's inability to overcome setbacks, and their struggles to succeed under less oppression than what they previously experienced in history. One woman said, "Black men survived slavery but they can't survive freedom; I am tired of hearing excuses for them," (Dixon 1998: 499). Women have come to expect more from Black men and feel that if they could survive a hardship like slavery they should be able to attain more now. Due to the inability to find what they are looking for in their potential mates, some Black women have chosen or been forced into singlehood. One woman expressed, "A man is not even a part of my life's dreams," while another said, "I've been married twice and I turn out to be the head of the household because they had nothing to offer. Now I am alone but not because I want to be," (Dixon 1998: 500). The expectation of stable employment and financial support Black women seek from Black men is important in the relationship's dynamic. These women value men who are willing to work as hard, if not harder than them. The result for some of the women who will not settle for unemployed Black men is to be single, and others remind themselves that having a man is not part of their life goals.

Mate Selection

Observing and understanding what Black women seek in their potential marriage partners is significant when determining hindrances in forming initial relationships. When it comes to physical appearance in regards to mate selection, skin complexion is a feature some Black men and women consider. For other ethnicities this may not be an issue, however for Black Americans social constructs about skin color can negatively

affect their lifestyle. Ross (1997) found in his study that 16.8 percent of Black women

and 38.3 percent of Black men would prefer to marry someone with a light skin tone.

Black women's focus on skin tone is less important in mate selection compared to Black

men. This characteristic may not be the most important component in what women look

for in their potential mates; however it is a factor that is strongly considered when a

Black woman is hoping to be looked at as a potential spouse by Black men. Hamilton,

Goldsmith and Darity (2009) also examined the influence of skin shade on marriage for

black females, and they discovered that, "…55 percent of light skinned black females had

been married, but only 30 percent of those with medium skin shade and 23 percent of the

dark skinned females had ever been married," (p. 34). Skin tone, a physical trait, has

become a powerful determinate in the formation of intimate relationships between Black

men and women. Hamilton et al. (2009) said, "…there are significant numbers of

societies where the more beautiful woman is considered to be the woman with lighter

skin. This phenomenon, necessarily, will have manifestations in markets for marriage,"

(p. 33). Seeing how skin color effects the formation of Black relationships sheds light on

how the color complexity within the Black culture is very prevalent. Unlike qualities such

as education attainment, employment or honesty, skin color is an inherent characteristic

that people cannot control.

Black men not only look at skin color as an influence on mate selection, they also

consider other factors. According to King and Allen (2009), three factors that Black men

found important when selecting a mate were "…cleanliness, fidelity and faithfulness, and

being responsible," (p. 575). Additionally, qualities sought by both Black men and

women are income, spirituality, and honesty (King and Allen 2009). Although both Black

women and men may have similar expectations in what they look for in their partners,

none of them are inherent like skin color. It is the person's cultural upbringing and

experiences that provide each person with their preferences.

Black women who have achieved higher education and are mothers have a

different set of standards when selecting potential mates than childless Black women of

the same educational status. According to Holland (2009), factors such as honesty, the

ability for the man to get along with the child/children, family orientation, hard-work, and

spirituality are important. They have a desire for good dynamics between her child and

partner, with his focus being on family, and his ability to show he is a hard worker

(Holland 2009). However childless Black men and women are more concerned with

faithfulness, physical appearance such a skin color, and honesty. It is evident that women

with children are forced to not only think about what they want for themselves, but also

for their children as well.

Understanding factors that lead to commitment and longevity in relationships is

significant when Black women are selecting a mate. Davis et al. (2000) sought to

commitment in their partnership. Both males and females in this study valued investment

and satisfaction as the two key components that led them to committed relationships

(Davis et al. 2000). Investments were defined as a combination of time, effort, and/or

resources, while satisfaction was key for commitment, as it represented how satisfied a

person was with their partner, whether it was physical (attractiveness or sexual) or the

overall relationship (Davis et al. 2000). Knowing what Black Americans value as traits

toward commitment in terms of relationships is important, because those elements lead to formation and foundation of family.

Careers and Marriage

Women with college education may face conflict between their careers and their intimate relationships. Barnett et al. (2003) examined both male and female college seniors of various races, and their concerns about the potential for career-marriage conflict. The authors of this study concluded that students who had mothers with careers while they were growing up were less concerned about conflict between their potential marriage and career. However, those who had mothers that worked little to none worried more about the conflict (Barnett et al. 2003). This literature provides insight about the pressures of continuing education and making career decisions. With the attainment of higher education resulting in better careers, finding balance between a career and other aspects of life such as dating and marriage can become an internal battle. This battle may not be of much concern to some; however it may impact the lives of others greatly depending on their upbringing and personal goals. It is critically important to examine the choices women choose to make about marriage in relation to their careers. Depending on the personal priorities of the woman, focusing on a career could potentially outweigh the importance of marriage. However, it could also be said that they are equally important or aspiring for a partner may take precedence over career aspirations.

Influences on Black Interpersonal Relationships

There are several reasons for lower marriage rates among Black men and women in America. Marbley's (2003) tackles the issues that have the most negative impact on the relationships between Black women and men. One of the biggest hindrances on the Black male and female relationship is the historical impact of racism.

Marbley (2003) argues,

> …in the 21st century, race issues related to disparities employment, education, masculinity and femininity, and incarceration continue to impact African Americans on almost every front, and African American male and female interpersonal relationships have not escaped the effects. This means that, to some degree, racism and racial discrimination have adversely affected heterosexual mating behavior and continue to do so. (P.16)

Marbley provides the notion that Black American relationships have been negatively affected a great deal because of the harsh race issues and oppression that they have had to endure. It alludes that Black American intimate relationships are not where they should be in terms of societal expectations, which is similar to where the group stands in relation to education, employment and incarceration.

Additionally, there is competition among Black women because of the shortage of Black men that are deemed "marriageable." There is an imbalance in the number of Black women and men in this country. According to Marbley, "…the census data clearly reveal that females have been excessive in the African American population of the United States since at least 1850," (2003: 19). This poses challenges for African-American women when finding a mate. If we were in a world where all Black women and men identified as heterosexual and sought marriage as a life goal, there would be a deficiency

in the number of Black men, thus leaving some Black women without an option for marriage. Although this is not the case, we still find that the lack of available Black men remains a hindrance to Black women obtaining marriage.

Another strain on women being able to find and establish interpersonal relationships with Black men is the increased rate of incarceration. This tremendously impacts the availability of "marriageable" men for Black women. According to Lopoo and Western (2005), "Incarceration has the immediate effect of removing people from their community, separating unmarried men from the pool of possible partners, and straining relationships among those already married," (p.720). It would be a difficult and, for some, an undesirable task to try to marry someone who has experienced incarceration. Although it is not only those who are currently serving time that are removed from the pool of "marriageable" men, also men who have been released have a hard time re-entering into the group of potential partners. Lopoo and Western (2005) argue that, "Incarceration carried a stigma that marks ex-offenders as dishonest or unreliable," (p.123). Incarceration causes negative perceptions of these men which results in their lack of control to change people's preconceived ideas about them. Black women will likely seek out a man who currently is not or has not been incarcerated, but it is unfair to assume this about all Black women.

Variances in educational attainment can also have a negative influence on the potential for interpersonal relationships between black women and men. Studies show that Black women have more years of education than Black men (Marbley 2003). Additionally Marbley (2003) points out, "…African American career women constitute a

larger proportion of females than African American men do among males in professional

jobs, and the African American career women constitute a larger proportion of the

African American professional community than white women in the white professional

world," (p.20). This exemplifies the disproportion amongst black women and men when

it comes to education and employment. More importantly, the significance of

educational homogamy and the role it plays in marriage and marital attainment is

pertinent to this topic. Shafer and Qian (2010) report the following:

> ...Educational attainment affects the age at marriage and the
> likelihood of marriage. Less-educated men and women, such as
> those with less than a high school education or a high school
> diploma, are more likely to marry at younger ages compared to
> their highly-educated counterparts…the likelihood of marriage
> increases with age for the highly educated…Overall, college-
> educated men and women are more likely to marry homogamously
> than heterogamously…Highly-educated women tend to retreat
> from marriage rather than marry men with lower educational
> attainment than themselves . (P.681)

Education is essential when it comes to people choosing who to marry. If there are

educational attainment discrepancies between a man and a woman, it could reduce their

likelihood of getting married. Although most people continue their education for personal

gains, it can also be noted that it indirectly influence other aspects of life such as

marriage.

Singlehood

There is an emerging cohort of people considered SALAs (single and living

alone), otherwise known as the Love Jones Cohort (termed from a popular African

American film about a group of single Black middle-class males and females) (Marsh et

al. 2007). Single, middle-class Black Americans is a rapidly increasing population, and Marsh et al. (2007) seeks to find out whether this is becoming the new Black middle class. Marsh et al. argues, "Although SALAs still represent a relatively small percentage of the black middle class overall, among those ages 25-34 in 2000, SALAs account for roughly a quarter of black middle-class households," (2007: 753). Though there has been an increase in this particular cohort, there has been a decrease in the number of middle-class Black married couples during the same period (Marsh et al. 2007). This change in lifestyle amongst African Americans is suggestive of their choices about marriage. It is not only the emergence of SALAs, but also single Black Americans who chose to live with just their child(ren) or another adult and a child without being married (Marsh et al. 2007). There are higher percentages of women becoming SALAs than men, according to Marsh et al (2007). Although it is uncertain whether or not this is intentional, it still speaks volumes about the reduction of marriage with in the Black community. These characteristics of lifestyle choices reflect the change in perception of marriage by Black middle class. However, according to Marsh et al.(2007), there is still a fairly high percentage of people who live with another adult but choose to remain single. Black people are taking an alternative approach to marriage by living with others or alone.

The literature that has been reviewed gives understanding about factors that both positively and negatively affect intimate relationships amongst Black women and men. It is not only the employment status of their potential partner that influences Black women's thoughts on intimate relationships, but their own career paths as well. Research has revealed that careers can be very important to women, so much so they are conflicted

between their jobs and marriage. There are social issues such as incarceration and unemployment rates of Black men that negatively affect the potential for interpersonal relationships between black men and women as well. The perception black women have of black men and their employment status allows for the examination of how job security is essential when making a decision to become exclusively involved with someone.

The ideas of marriage and intimate relationships from the perspective of Black women who have attained higher education is a topic that has been overlooked in several studies, however this growing population deserves attention. I seek to understand the qualities this cohort hopes for from their potential mates, and reasons for why they desire such qualities. Some of the most important questions that this research seeks to are, how do Black women with higher education view marriage as a goal in relation to their career and educational and is it something that they see as important in their lives? Singlehood is emerging as a new middle class for Black Americans, thus more and more Black women in are opting to live alone or cohabitate, but ultimately choosing not to get married. As this type of cohort begins to rise in numbers for Black Americans, the middle class is starting to shift from married people to singles.

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

I interviewed 12 heterosexual single Black women who have attained a bachelor's degree or more or are in their final semester of undergraduate studies. Their ages were between 21 to 60-years-old. The participants were chosen using the snowball sampling method. This convenience sample began with me contacting personal acquaintance at Minnesota State University, Mankato, and asking if they knew of women who met the criteria to participate in the study. The participants were contacted either by e-mail or in-person, depending on my connection to them.

The snowball method was used to try to gather as many participants as possible in the state of Minnesota and Wisconsin. Initially I sought to find my entire population in Mankato, Minnesota, a city of roughly 50,000 people. However, due to the relatively small Black population in the Mankato, Minnesota area, I had to seek participants in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area. I was not able to find enough participants in the state of Minnesota using the snowball method, so I extended my participant search to the Greater Milwaukee area, where I was able to find a sufficient amount of participants to gain a variance in perspective.

I initially wanted to use 20-30 participants for the study, but due to location limitations and inability find enough women who met the criteria of the study, I was unable to do so. Had I been able to obtain the desired number of participants, it would have created a greater variance in educational, family, dating and career backgrounds

amongst the women, thus being able to make this a more diverse sample of single Black women.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to collect data. The interview schedule was used to guide the discussion with each participant; however some of the conversations did not follow the interview schedule due to the variance in each individual's experiences, thoughts and perceptions. Once it was established that the woman identified as at least third generation Black American born, single and was at minimum in their final semester of undergrad at a college or university, the interview process began. It took roughly three months to complete all of the interviews.

The tools used during the interviews were a schedule instrument, a digital voice recorder and a computer program for transcription called Express Scribe. The consent forms will remain in a locked cabinet in the office of my advisor for up to three years. The audio files of the interviews will be saved as a locked file on my personal laptop, which only I have access to, and also backed up on a flash drive that I will keep in a safe. Once this project is complete and approved by Minnesota State University, Mankato Department of Sociology and College of Graduate Studies, the files on both my laptop and flash drive will be destroyed for the safety and confidence of the participants. All known data will be kept in confidence and presented in a generalized manner, with all identifying information changed for the participants' protection.

During this process there was a chance that some data could be lost due to issues with technology. I continually checked the technology I used while interviewing and saved the files on both my laptop and a flash drive to lessen the risk of losing data. I

asked questions about family history in regards to marriage, past relationships, dating other ethnicities, qualities sought in potential mates, career and life goals and feelings toward marriage. Since this was a semi-structured interview I had a set of questions that I was prepared to ask every participant, but there were times when I asked clarifying questions as well as questions to help gather further perspective.

There was potential for issues to arise throughout this research. One issue I thought could arise was the feeling of discomfort during the interview due to unwanted feelings or memories arising. This could have happened if there were negative experiences attached to the topic of discussion. Much of the dialogue was based on questions about family and personal relationship history, which could have brought up bad memories, traumatizing situations, and/or feelings of discomfort. I let the participants know at the beginning of the interview that it was a voluntary study, and at any moment they could choose to not answer a question or end the interview. As far as confidentiality, there was reassurance after the informed consent form was signed by the participant that the information they provide would be used only for the purpose of the study and all identifying information would be changed for the protection of their identities. Additionally the interviews happened in private settings to help secure what was being said.

As previously mentioned this research was done using in-depth interviews. Since the cohort of heterosexual single educated black women is such a small group that is underrepresented in research, participants will appreciate that their voices will be heard on the idea of marriage. I made myself vulnerable by disclosing my own thoughts and

feelings throughout the interviews. I wanted the interviewees to feel in control throughout the interview since it was most important that comfortable enough to express their feelings honestly.

The literature provided me with an understanding about what has already been discovered through other research about relationship dynamics amongst Black men and women. In addition, a cultural review was done to understand the cultural background of the women and their families. Finally a self-review was done so I could better understand and clarify any biases that I had about the group of participants. Doing these reviews helped me establish a level of comfort and understanding about the participants.

Data Analysis

I chose to use Grounded Theory as my process for analyzing the collected data. There were several steps to this approach, which included data-collection, coding, memo writing, categorizing and writing. After the data had been collected I coded the transcribed information, initially using line-by-line then moving to in vivo. This provided me the opportunity to discover any gaps that appeared in the data, and to, "Look at [my] data critically and analytically," (Charmaz 2008:51). Instead of having preconceived notions about the data, I was able to explore what each participant was trying to convey and actively extract themes of the data. Once I had coded each interview, I found the most significant codes and began memo writing or taking notes about my thoughts, comparisons and connections about the data (Charmaz 2008). Memoing was a crucial step in helping form the themes that were generated through the data. I was able to find crucial patterns and emerging themes from the data. Once the memoing was complete I

was able to categorize my thoughts and themes, thus creating the findings section. This process allowed me to actively analyze my data and create theories to help better understand college-educated Black women's perceptions of marriage and intimate relationships.

FINDINGS

I organized the findings of this study into areas that focused on the participants' thoughts, influences and challenges when forming intimate relationships. Several patterned themes emerged from the research. However, one overarching theme presented itself when looking at the entire study, which was age. The difference in ages proved to have an impact on the women's perceptions of marriage. This theme is reflected throughout the other key findings. Each participant has been identified with a fictitious name to protect their identities.

Family Dynamics as an Influence

After completing the interviews, I narrowed down the influences on forming intimate relationships, and family dynamics was most prevalent amongst all participants. Some of the participants expressed that they had parents that were either never married to each other or had divorced. Additionally, many of the women in the study indicated that a number of their other family members were either never married, divorced or cohabitating with their partners. One woman, Tina, indicated that she was embarrassed by her family tree. She said, "I recently did a timeline about my family and I was highly embarrassed about it." Reflecting on the family timeline she had created, she felt a sense of shame about what she had discovered. She proceeded to discuss the dynamics of her maternal grandparents. "They weren't together. They were just dating. That whole top row was not married within the family. Like there's no one married." Her grandparents were not

married, and it seemed that was a reflection of her entire family structure. She

particularly emphasizes this idea that marriage in her family is done for reasons

other than love. "Like marriage is not something that's practiced within the family,

and I don't think it's like love first. I think it's more the right thing to do when they

have kids." Tina views marriage as something that is done out of obligation and not

necessarily because of love.

The trends in marital status for Tina's family are much different than that of

my oldest participant, Patricia, who shared that there were many people in her

family who were married, and she was the one that went against the grain. She

explains the relationships in her family as,

> ... My mom and dad are married, and they were the whole time. Um,
> my aunt who was my mother's sister was married until her husband
> was killed, and she remarried. Um, my cousins all have spouses and
> children. On both sides there was a divorce, you know. Then my
> cousin remarried. Um, my father's siblings all had spouses and they all
> stayed married to them. Um, I think divorce was – I think I was the
> first person to get divorced.

When Patricia acknowledged that she believed she was the first in her family to

divorce, it was almost as if it had never really dawned on her until that moment. She

had not remarried like her cousin; rather she remained single, which was something

that seemed taboo in her family.

Other participants observed a mix of relationships in their families, but found

influence in their parents or grandparents as role models for what marriage should

look like. Margret discussed the strengths of her parents, stating:

> One of the things my mom constantly says is that the reason she and
> my father have been together so long is that they started off as friends.

And I've actually heard a lot of people say that, you basically have to be friends. You have to like the other person, and not just think I love you, but actually like the person. Like, I like to hang around you. I like to talk to you. I even like to hear you talk. Um, both mentioned that they make each other laugh. Um, they can talk about anything, and that kind of helps. So, umm I would say that they have a pretty good relationship…So um, they've…being friends kind of allowed them to talk through a lot of things and decide, ok, either—well not either, but how we gonna deal with this? That's mostly how it's been. So that's kind of been the role model in terms of my parents…when I think about my maternal grandparents I see kind of a reflection of what my parents have.

She highlights the important qualities she sees in her parent's relationship that make them role models in terms of marriage. Further, she acknowledges the similar traits she sees in her maternal grandparents. Margret goes into specific details about how dynamics like making each other laugh and being able to talk with each other is an important part of what she considers a successful marriage.

Perceptions of Marriage

One of the most important aspects of these women's perspectives was the value they put on marriage, especially how it changes with age. There was a clear variance between the older participants and the younger ones. The older participants used their experiences and perspectives as a way of determining the value they put on marriage, whereas, the younger participants shared more of their positive hopes for marriage.

Margret, a professional in her late 30s, discussed her thoughts on marriage, emphasizing her frustration with the role the government plays in it. When asked about the value she places on marriage she said,

> That's a really good question, um especially in this sort of moment we
> have of being – our government itself and sort of certain groups being
> protective of their idea of who's allowed to do so. Which sort of forces
> people to rethink what does marriage mean, and why are we so quote
> unquote protective of it that only – you know, same sex people can't
> get marriage. No, no, no. Like really? Whatever. Um, so I kind of feel
> like that way about it.

Margret's thoughts about marriage have been influenced by the idea that all people

are not protected by the laws of marriage in the United States. This concept that our

government has the ability to decide who can and cannot get marriage has made her

rethink what the meaning of marriage really is. However, Margret further discusses

that this has not always been her thought about marriage. While in her 20s she had

a completely different perspective. She said:

> Had you asked me when I was in my…twenties, I really did. Like one
> of those people, I had the plan. By a certain age I would be married. By
> a certain age I would be um—wait I—actually I think the career
> started first, then I was married. Then give it a few more years to kind
> of really work in the career, and then I was potentially having a child
> or two, hadn't completely decided. Um, yea so had you asked me then
> I would have felt a little stronger about marriage. I don't think it's
> been oh – necessarily that oh I have to get married.

Margret used to fantasize about her life plans and the order in which everything

would happen, but now sees marriage as not being a necessity. This is common for

many of the older participants of this study. In fact, Patricia, currently a 60-

something-year-old retired educator and divorcee, discussed how she has come full-

circle on the whole idea of marriage. When asked about the value she places on

marriage, she said,

> Um, when I got married I put a great deal of value on marriage. I was
> 27. I think all women, and I don't know, have this romantical idea of
> marriage. You know, my husband, my house with my picket

fence…The Volvo and you know, whatever the car is. And you could just see it. You could almost taste it, so that you move toward that…I don't really know if I put a value on marriage as I would see it now. I think I just wanted to be married, and I'm not sure if the time that I got married, that I knew what that was.

Prior to Patricia's divorce she had this idea of what her marriage was supposed to be like and very much valued marriage. She romanticized about it, and accepts that many other will do so as well. What I found interesting was the feelings she has about marriage now. She further explains:

How do I view marriage now, at 60? It's really interesting because I've come full circle. I went through a period where I was like, nah I don't need a man…I had boyfriends. I dated guys. I didn't want to marry any of them…I'm cool. You know, I got a job. You know, I don't make a whole lot of money, but I make enough money. But now I'm at the place where I am trying to reinvent myself. And I would consider marriage, and it would be more companionship. A traveling buddy. Someone just to laugh and do stuff with. It's not the romantical, my sweep me away, sweep me off my feet you know, heart go flutter flutter… It would be different. It would serve a different purpose.

Patricia has been on a spectrum of desire for marriage, from having this thought of an ideal marriage, to not wanting to marry at all, to finally wanting to get married for a far different reason than when she was in her 20s. She disclosed that if she were to marry now it would be more about companionship, and not so much about the need for the romantic aspect of it. The purpose would not be to live out the ideal partnership that people think of when couples marry, but more so to have someone to do something with.

While both Margret and Patricia have changed their perspectives about marriage over the years, many of my younger participants see marriage similar to how Margret and Patricia did when they were in their 20s. When I posed the

question about the value of marriage to Cindy, a graduate student in her final

semester, she responded saying:

> I want to be married, and I want to be married forever. Like I want to
> be one of them old couples that's just fartin' together, like you know
> he needs to help me you know, walk everywhere. Like you know, the
> type of couple that nothing is weird…So I want, kinda like a fairytale,
> but I know what's real – I know in fairytales you be arguing. I mean
> that's part of the love part. But, yea I want to be married, and I don't
> want a divorce…

Cindy's perspective shows her hopes for growing old with someone and "fartin'

together" with them, which exemplifies the level of comfort she expects to have with

her partner. It also reiterates the romanticized idea about marriage that Patricia felt

when she was in her 20s. However, Cindy understands that although she would like

a fairytale, it is not realistic. There is something to be said about how she

romanticizes marriage. Her comment about not wanting a divorce says a lot about

her awareness that it is a possibility, but not an option for her.

Tina, a first year graduate student talked about the value she has on marriage

as well. Importantly, she shares her worthiness of marriage. When asked about her

thoughts on marriage she said,

> I think the importance comes from me I think. I don't know, maybe I'm
> being more selfish because I feel like I – it's more about me, what I
> deserve now. Because I feel like umm, coming from my background
> I—I like defeated all statistics I guess. So therefore I deserve like you
> know like if I wanna get – I deserve to be married before I have a child
> and that's how I'm only looking at it now…I don't want to be married,
> and then like, aww we divorced. Like, I don't want a divorce at all.
> So…um marriage is…something I strongly recommend now just
> because of where I am at educationally and I deserve a – you know, a
> marriage mate. And that's – it's not like a happy fairytale type of
> marriage, but I just deserve it.

Since Tina feels she has beaten the negative statistics against her and what she has obtained educationally, she deserves to be married. It may not necessarily be a fairytale one, but she definitely feels worthy of getting married and living it out without getting a divorce. She and Cindy both share this idea of wanting to get married and not deal with the burden of divorce. Tina's embarrassment with the marital statuses in her family may be a heavy influence on why divorce is also not an option for her.

The four perspectives provided shed light on how thoughts of marriage can stem from experiences and be very generational. Certainly, the older women saw marriage as something that is nice, but not necessary or use it to serve a different purpose. However, the younger participants reflected more on their desire for marriage and the avoidance of divorce. These trends were common throughout the study with some variance in thoughts of marriage.

Setting Standards

A major emphasis of the study was the standards the participants had for their current or potential partners. This was especially fascinating because some of the women shared details of what they wanted, while others were very brief and highlighted only some of the important things they needed.

When I asked Tina what her ideal partner would be like she initially elaborated on the physical things she wanted saying,

> He gotta be tall. Like, uh…athletic build. And he have to have dark
> features. He don't have to be like Black, like super dark skin, but like
> he's gonna be a African-American, but dark features…My background

> is in like sports so I want someone that's athletic and that like have
> the same views as the importance of sports...

She further explained the importance of education, "You don't have to be master's

level, but you gone have to be undergraduate level, because you – that's like a rare

breed. " Tina sheds light on how important it is for her partner to be both physically

attractive as well as have some post-secondary education. She also mentions during

the interview that she does not want a man with children and expects him to be

both book and street smart.

Contrary to Tina's list of things she prefers in her partner, Cindy provided an

elaborate list of things in addition to physical feature she needed from her partner

which include:

> ...good personality...caring...loyalty...somebody who can correct me
> respectfully...tell me his feelings and how he feels and honesty. Very
> much so with the honesty. I like men – Ok some of my favorite
> categories are men who are either athletes, and/or are in the military
> of some kind for the fact that it shows discipline. You have to have a
> certain physique...So people that show that they care about their lives.
> You know, like not out drinking all the time. I don't want someone
> who eats only fast food.

She was very detailed in what she expects from a potential partner, especially in

terms of how he treats her. She also shared with me that since she has been in

college the criteria for a man to have ambition is no longer an option, but a must,

whereas before it was just a bonus. She has stressed that even when she was in high

school a good personality was important to her.

Both Cindy and Tina stress the importance of their standards, but neither

harp on the idea of needing financial stability from their partner, which is expressed

by Rhonda and Patricia, both of whom are much older than Cindy and Tina. Rhonda

bluntly stated:

> Um, I know now that I want other things that people have financially.
> Like I want to be able to travel the world, so out of the country. Um,
> and have money to do that without living paycheck to paycheck. So
> I'm not looking for somebody who is just living pay check to pay check
> and not making ends meet.

Adding to that, Patricia shared, "...not wealthy but financially independently that I'm

not, you know. Someone you know, with great numbers. Um, I'm being real sort of

selfish here, but somebody with good credit. I don't want to date a credit score.

Um…um, somebody that likes to travel." Both Rhonda and Patricia share the need to

be with someone that is financially stable, independent of them. Patricia feels that

wanting someone with good credit and financially independent of her may be a

selfish, but that is not all she wants. Both Rhonda and Patricia have mentioned their

desire to travel in the same mention of wanting to have someone who is financially

stable, which is because of the correlation between finances and traveling.

Location as a Limitation

As previously discussed, many of the participants set standards for the

qualities they want out of their partners. Keeping in mind this study took place in

Minnesota and Wisconsin, and in some cases rural areas of those states, many of the

women saw location as a limitation to them finding partners that meet their

standards. Sherry, a participant in her 30s living in a major metropolitan area,

shared her challenges finding a man in her area and the need to bring a partner with

you when deciding to live in her region and want to date a man of color.

> If I haven't met um, a man of color or African-American brother um
> that's at the same status as I am, educational-wise, I don't think I'm
> gonna find him. And I think, maybe geographically that has something
> to do with it as well. It's not like we in Baltimore or Washington, D.C.
> or Atlanta, Georgia, you know what I'm saying? So, most of the – and
> you know it's a joke because some of the women tell me you have to
> import yo men if you livin' in Minnesota. You have to import.

She shares how other parts of the country have a much denser population of educated Black men. It is much harder for her to find Black men that have similar education backgrounds as she does in her current location. Her unfortunate thought is if you are looking for an educated Black man you either need to move to the area already with a partner or you will need to move elsewhere in the country.

Tina also shared how she thought if she stayed in the Midwest region of the country she would have to lower her standards for Black men. She shared:

> I don't want to settle for less, but if I stay in the Midwest I might settle
> for less for the Black guys…So yea, that's why I want to see myself
> down south. Like, yea you talk. Yea, you pulling me. You got good
> game whatever, and you're smart. Oh my God, where have you been at
> all my life?

She is accepting that if she does not leave her current area there is a chance she would lessen her standards for what is available to her, but she has appreciation for men who live in the south.

Kimbra further discusses location as a hindrance to finding partners that will live up to her standards, but she shares that location change does not necessarily guarantee you find what you are looking for. She talks about the city where she lives, with it being so poor, many of the Black men were just trying to get their

basics together. I asked her if she thought her location affected the men she met and

she responded,

> You know I have access to the internet. You know actually I've been told by some of my fellow sistahs that it is where we are. Like if we were in you know, Atlanta or something it would be better. But what I think is that each category just grows and grows. So you might have more of each category. So let's say you have 10 percent, that's great, you know, whatever. It's going to be the same thing. It might be more people, but it's the same ratio. So it might increase your chances in some forms, but you're going to get more of the bullcrap too.

Kimbra enforces this idea that although you may look elsewhere in the country that

may have more of what you are looking for as far as Black men, however it may

result end up dealing with more of the things you are not looking for. For example,

there may be a ten percent increase in Black men in a particular location, however

that could potentially mean an increase in the number of men that do not have the

qualities this cohort of women are looking for. For example, there may be an

increased population of Black men who are unemployed, incarcerated, have

children with other women or identify as homosexual. Kimbra is essentially noting

that just because there are more of them, does not necessarily mean there are going

to be more that have desirable qualities.

Exploring Other Races

There is an old quote that says, "Birds of a feather flock together," or in other

words, people who look alike or have common interests tend to be attracted to one

another. After evaluating the standards set by the women in this study and their

frustrations with finding someone that meets their expectations, it seemed

necessary to get an understanding of whether or not they were willing to explore other races for potential partners.

One of the participants, Deena, during the time of the study was seriously involved with a White man. She mentioned that she'd only dated one man that identified as Black. When I asked her why that had been the case she said,

> Um, I really don't know why. Um, growing up there were guys my age that were Black that were all around and that liked me. I just – we didn't have the same goals. Like we just didn't have the same educational goals and have the same like just – we just weren't – it wasn't a good fit. And then as I got older most of my friends were White. Or most of my friends are White, yea. So that's just kind of the circle that I ended up in.

Deena felt disconnected with Black men, and did not see them as having the same goals as her. Also her network of friends was majority White, which led to her dating more of those that were in or around her environment. She had essentially become attracted to men that were similar to those she held the closest relationships with, which did not include Black men.

Contrary to Deena's attraction to White men, Kimbra and Patricia were adamant about not exploring the option of White men. Kimbra stated that she is only open to African-American men and is often criticized for it. In fact, she shared that her friends suggested she date a White man because she is not going to find a Black man that will meet her standards, despite her thinking that she does not have considerably high standards. Kimbra shared not only her thoughts about why she chooses to establish relationships with Black-American men and also alludes to her sexual preference in men only,

> For one, I'm not really attracted to women or others. I mean I've read
> in Ebony or Essence where they say African—Black males are not just
> African-American males, but my experience with brothas from the
> islands like Jamaica, Trinidad, you know, um I don't really click well
> with Africans. Um, I'm not interested in women, so and of course not
> white men or anything. Um, that just leaves me with African American
> males."

Kimbra has found herself not connecting with men of other ethnicities, and is not

interested in exploring women either. She has found her preference is only in Black

men and does not want to explore other races, ethnicities or women. Patricia

shared a bit more in-depth about her reasoning for refusing to explore White men as

an option, focusing on how it impacts the Black community. She further explained,

> I don't – because I don't see the Black family being stable and being – I
> think because I work at the public schools and I see so many children
> who – African-American children who are struggling in so many ways.
> And then I also see, in my narrow world, bi-racial children who
> struggle too. There is something weird about bi-racial kids. It's
> terrible for me to say, but it's true…So my thinking is that you know,
> we really need to strengthen the race in a way. And African-American
> – Black people really really need to get it together and stick together.
> I've always thought that. I just do. That we just don't do enough of that
> and especially our men. You know, and it's just ridiculous. And so yea,
> it's a philosophical thing. I mean I guess if I – I guess I don't even look
> at White men. White men, I don't look at Hispanic males. I don't even
> see 'em.

Patricia based a lot of her feelings against dating outside of her race on the idea that

there is a need to strengthen the Black family dynamic. There is a sense of

community needed to help children in the Black community, and that stems from

enhancing the Black family structure.   She further shared that it also comes down to

her lack of attraction to White and Hispanic men.

Participants like Sherry say they are open to the idea of race they have not had the opportunity to explore the opportunity. Sherry shares her inability to recognize if someone other than a Black man is attracted to her, saying:

> …I haven't had a lot of men outside of my race approach me. And If they have I haven't been able to recognize that they were trying to connect with me…Maybe because I've been single for so long where I'm only having tunnel vision. I'm only looking for a Black man.

Sherry's inability to recognize if a man outside of her own race is showing a romantic interest in her along with her focus on only looking for Black men has perhaps hindered her from having an intimate relationship. She further talks about the lack of Black love in the United States. She says, "…we have limited role models and exemplars in the African-American culture of Black love, Black marriage." I found this to be particularly interesting because it shed light on this notion that perhaps there is a desire to have intimate relationships amongst Black people, but there are not many examples of it. This goes back to what Patricia talked about with strengthening the Black family. There is a need to create more relationships that are models for future Black couples in order to help enhance the Black community and culture.

DISCUSSION

Although I used the Grounded Theory approach for this study and let theory emerge from the data, there are pre-existing theories that could potentially apply to the research as well. Particularly, Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Theory, which focuses on how people go through eight stages of development throughout their lives (Whitebourne, Sneed, Sayer 2009). Throughout the research there were several differences in thoughts and perceptions between the women in their 20s to early 30s and those in their late 30s and older. This says a lot about how development impacts perceptions of marriage. The stage that applies most to this research is intimacy versus isolation. Orlofsky, Marcia and Lesser (1973) describe the intimate as an individual who is currently involved in or seeking and intimate relationship. This is done by continually developing and creating close networks of friends and frequently dating. On the other hand there are isolates, who are categorized as individuals that struggle to form intimate relationships and date infrequently (Orlofsky et al. 1973).

This theory relates well to this study because we can gather from the participants that some struggle to find the desired intimate relationships and are forced to be isolates. The older participants in the study have already gone through this stage in their lives and do not find themselves as concerned with forming intimate relationships as much as the younger participants. It can certainly be said however, that the younger participants are going through or could potentially be in a crisis between intimacy and isolation.

Through the findings, I have presented five perspectives and challenges that a select group of single heterosexual college-educated Black women shared about finding and forming intimate relationships. It was through the exploration of family dynamics, the value the participants put on marriage, qualities they expected their partners to have, limitations due to location and the importance of race, which allowed me to gain a sense of how some educated Black women have come to perceive marriage and intimate relationships. Although a few of the participants were involved in a relationship during the time of study, they still acknowledged some of the same challenges the single participants faced. One of those challenges was the need for their partners to have some college education. Tina expressed that her partner not having any form of secondary education became an issue when they were having discussions about their experiences and his inability to connect with her intellectually. Similarly, Rhonda, who was not seeing anyone at the time of the study, expressed that a man having an education was important for her as well because she wanted to be with someone with the same upward mobility as her. I noted Shafer and Qian (2010) in the literature review, and how their research suggested that educational attainment and how it can affect the likelihood of marriage. They pointed out that men and women are more likely to marry someone who has an education similar to their own. This was reiterated by my participants as well, especially Tina and Rhonda, in that they wanted someone "on their level."

Although researchers are trained to begin their studies without bias and preconceived notions, I made some assumptions about what I thought the

participants were going to say in regards to making choices between career and marriage. I thought it was a possibility that many of them wanted to focus on their careers and education, and would not be concerned about marriage. This was not necessarily the case. The participants certainly talked about the importance of their careers and education, but for many of them it was not as important as it related to finding a partner. My oldest participant, Patricia, clearly stated, "I never thought of my job, my work, as a career. Not really. Not in a way that I think young people do now." She senses that young people place more of an emphasis on their careers than her generation. When asked how she felt her education and career affected her finding a partner, Bethany stated, "I think that men are sometimes intimidated by women's success because women are so –or a woman like myself is so independent…But I do think a lot of men do like an independent woman where they don't have to always take care of them or they're go-getters." The difference between Patricia and Bethany is the importance they place on their careers. Patricia does not see her job as a career, whereas Bethany sees her accomplishments as an indicator of her status as an independent woman. This is interesting because there is quite a bit of difference in age between these two. Again, this emphasizes how age causes variance in perception.

During some of the interviews and sometimes after, the participants shared how their participation in this study allowed them to reflect on what they wanted out of an intimate relationship, and the actual limitations they faced. With all participants living in the upper Midwest, many of them discussed their location and

lack of Black men who meet their standards as being prominent limitations in trying to form relationships. One of the participants, Sherry, talked about the lack of black men in her region and how it is recommended that women bring their men with them. I thought this was interesting, because it shows how lack of available men in the area could increase the number of SALAs, which was discussed by Marsh et al. (2007). They talk about this increased cohort of Black men and women living alone. Albeit may be for various reasons, it should be noted that it is a growing cohort. Many of my participants are amongst this group of Black Americans.

The younger members of the study talked about wanting to get married and divorce not being an option for them. They stressed specifics about what they wanted in their partners physically and intellectually, whereas the older participants talked more about wanting someone established both financially and in their career, as well as wanting good companionship. It is also important to note that a lot of the older women discussed their difference in perspective during the time of the study and when they were in their 20s. It highlighted a lot of their personal developments and the experiences they had that influenced their perspectives.

While the core themes I extracted through my research may not be true for all single, heterosexual, college-educated Black women, they give some insight on that cohort's feelings, influences and limitations in forming intimate relationships. It is my hope that this study will spark further conversation about specific cohorts of Black Americans and their thoughts on relationships.

Limitations

One of the biggest limitations to this study was finding participants. I initially wanted to do a randomized study of 20-30 participants so I could have the ability to generalize, but it was difficult to finding an accessible network with a large number of Black women that met the criteria of the study. I thought this cohort of Black women would be easy to find in Minnesota, but I was forced to look outside the state and tap into networks in Wisconsin. This made it extremely difficult to find time to do in-person interviews. In fact, I had to do my interview with Kimbra over the phone, which ended up being a challenge to record. Due to limited number of participants and the type of sampling method utilized, I am unable to generalize, but it does offer perspective to preexisting studies. This will be considered an exploratory study due to the limited number of participants involved.

Another difficulty I had with this study was initially being too involved personally. Since I am a single, heterosexual, college-educated Black woman, I was almost certain that the participants and I would share similar sentiments. When framing my questions, I strived to retrieve answers similar to my own. I took some time to disconnect myself from the study, and decided to take a semi-structured approach to allow the participants to share their own thoughts, experiences and influences.

Recommendations

For future research I would like to see a generalized study that evaluates the difference of perceptions and qualities sought in intimate relationships between college-educated and non-college educated Black women. It would be interesting to see if they have the same desires for qualities needed in their partners. I would also like to see a comparative study between college-educated Black men and women. I am curious as to what, if any, are the limitations Black men may have in finding intimate relationships with Black women.

There is already quite a bit of discussion about the dynamics of the Black family, but I certainly think focusing on college-educated Black people as a specific cohort would enhance that conversation. I think once further research is done, we can begin to look at the emerging trends within the community and evaluate the emerging voids and trends.

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Appendix A: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

"All the Single Ladies:" Single College-Educated Black Women's Perceptions of Marriage and Intimate Relationships

You are invited to take part in research about single college –educated Black women's perceptions and ideals about intimate relationships**.** You are a potential participant because you have either obtained a bachelor's degree or are in your final semester before obtaining your degree, an American-born Black woman and are unmarried. The research is being conducted by Brittany Henderson and Barbra Keating. We ask that you read this form before agreeing to be in the research.

Purpose
The purpose of the research is to understand the ideals and perceptions single heterosexual college-educated Black women have about intimate relationships. Taking into consideration personal experiences, family and culture, this study seeks to understand what shapes perceptions and ideals about intimate relationships.

Procedures
If you agree to be in this research, and sign this consent form, we ask that you participate in an in-depth interview, where you will be asked to answer several questions regarding the topic**.** Participation in this survey should take between 30 minutes to an hour and a half.

Risks
There are minimal risks during this study, but because of the subject matter there may be the arousal of discomfort or stress. Please be certain that this is a voluntary study and albeit the information you provide is graciously appreciated, you have the right to opt out of answering any questions. Additionally, names and locations will be changed in the report for your protection. Audio recording will be used as a means of collecting data. Although minimal risks are associated with audio recording, if for whatever reason someone were to hear a recording, participants may be identified by their voice. However, each recording will be downloaded onto a secure laptop and kept confidential to avoid this potential risk.

There are no direct benefits to participants in this study, however this study will heighten the social awareness of singlehood amongst college-educated Black women. Additionally, this study will be relevant to society because it will become an outlet for future research in which it could be compared to similar studies dealing the dynamics of intimate relationships.

Confidentiality
For the purpose of confidentiality, all participants' and persons involved with the participants' names, identities and personal information will be changed in the final

product of the study for the sake of confidentiality. During the time of the study all files will be stored in a locked cabinet in Dr. Keating's office, which is located in AH113F. Consent forms will be kept in this particular location for three years. The interviews will be done using audio recording and will be transcribed by Brittany Henderson. Those documents will remain stored on a secure computer throughout the remainder of the study. Upon the completion and approval of the study all files will be destroyed by deletion or shredding.

Voluntary nature of study
Your decision whether or not to participate in this research will not affect your current or future relations with Minnesota State University, Mankato. Even if you sign the consent form, you are free to stop participation at any time. You do not need to complete participation if you feel uncomfortable doing so.

Contact
The researchers conducting this study are Barbara Keating and Brittany Henderson. If you have any questions or concerns regarding the treatment of human subjects, contact: MSU IRB Administrator, Dr. Barry Ries, Minnesota State University, Mankato, Institutional Review Board, 115 Alumni Foundation, (507) 389-2321.

I have read the above information and understand that this survey is voluntary and I may stop at any time. I consent to participate in the study.

__ I agree to be audio recorded during the interview session

_____
Signature of participant

_____
Date

☐   Participant received a copy.

MSU IRB LOG #
Date of MSU IRB approval:
sssdsd