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African Americans Navigating Through Relationships Towards Marriage: A Grounded Theory Study

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African Americans Navigating Through Relationships Towards Marriage:
A Grounded Theory Study

by

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A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of
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Each person whose signature appears below certifies that this thesis/dissertation in his/her opinion is adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis/dissertation for the degree Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AA   African American

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

African Americans Navigating Through Relationships Towards Marriage: A Grounded
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by

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Dr. Jackie Williams-Reade, Chairperson

The purpose of this study was to explore if and how early parent-participant

relationships affect subsequent intimate relationships among African American couples.

Given the clear gap between African Americans' attitudes about marriage and the data

that show them to be the least likely to be married among other racial or ethnic groups in

the United States of America, a unique conceptualization [Life Course Developmental

framework, Object Relations theory, Symbolic Interactionism perspective] was used to

explore the role that early key figure-child social interactions potentially have in

influencing young African Americans interactions with their significant others.

To carry out the research purpose, a Charmaz's (2014) grounded theory approach

was used to develop a thorough exploration of if or how earlier relationships affect

subsequent intimate relationships with young African Americans transitioning through

non-marital and marriage relationships. A theoretical and convenience sampling strategy

was used to recruit 16 couples (32 individuals), mostly African American, between the

ages of 22 and 40 primarily residing in southern California. Individual interviews were

conducted as well as member check-ins. Interviews were audio taped and transcribed.

The rigor of this research study was evaluated by its credibility, transferability,

dependability, and confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). The results gave indication to four emergent patterns of family background influences. As couples dated from different family backgrounds, they responded by going through a three-stage process. Four patterns of responses emerged from the couples' different approaches to the three-stage process of reconfiguration. Recommendations for future research are discussed.

CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND

Scholars have noted that African Americans value marriage immensely (Barr, A. et al, 2015), and that most acknowledge the need to form healthy families through marriage (King & Allen, 2009). Indeed, a higher share of African Americans compared to other racial groups in the United States hold the view that it is important for a couple to marry if they plan to spend the rest of their lives together (Wang & Parker, 2014). However, research shows that the numbers of African Americans ages 25 and over who have never been married have quadrupled over the past 50 years: from 9% in 1960 to 36% in 2012, compared to their White counterparts whose percentage have doubled from 8% to 16% (Wang & Parker, 2014). Moreover, research has shown that African Americans are considered the least likely to marry and when they marry, they do so later, with their marriages more likely to be disrupted by separation or divorce, thus spending less time married compared to any other racial group in the United States (Perry, 2013; Dixon, 2009; Cherlin 1998). To better appreciate this dissociation of marriage ideals and marriage reality, it is most fitting to, first, acknowledge the long view of coupling patterns in order to gain perspective to the dynamics of coupling over time, and sequentially, identify a cultural event, the second demographic shift, which have had a categorical effect on how individuals carry out relationships with pronounced consequences in the African American community.

History of Marriage Trends in the United States

The widening divide between marriage ideals and marriage as a reality was not

always as pronounced as it is in its current state. A brief history of marriage trends in the United States speaks to a different reality. Data from U.S. Census Bureau (2012) show that from 1890 through 1950, the median age at first marriage for Black men was lower than White men. However, in 1960, the median age at first marriage has been higher for black men than for white men. In 2010, the median age at first marriage for African American men was 30.7, and for White men, 27.8 (Elliott, D.B. et al., 2012). Please see table 1 below.

Table 1. Median age of 1st Marriage 1890-2010 for Men

Median Age (of 1st marriage)	1890 -1950	**1960**	2010
Lower	AA men	**White men**	White men [28 years]
Higher	White men	**AA men**	AA men [31 years]

From 1890 through 1940, African American women had a lower median age at first marriage than White women. After 1950, the median age at first marriage for African American women was higher than for White women. In 2010, the median age at first marriage for Black women was 30.0 years and for White women 26.4 years (Elliott, D.B. et al., 2012). Please see table 2 below.

Table 2. Median age of 1st marriage 1890-2010 for Women

Median Age (of 1st marriage)	1890 -1950	**1950**	2010
Lower	AA women	**White women**	White women [26 years]
Higher	White women	**AA women**	AA women [30 years]

From 1890 through 1930, the percent of those age 35 and older never married was higher for White men than African American men. By 1960, this trend had reversed with African American men age 35 and over having a higher percent of never married. Please see table 3 below.

Table 3. Never married-age 35 and older for Men

'Never married' age 35 and older	1890 -1930	**1960**
Lower	AA men	**White men**
Higher	White men	**AA men**

African American women were more likely to have been married by age 35 than White women until circa 1970. In 2010, the percent of women 35 and over who never been married is 25% for African American women and 8% for White women (Elliott, D.B. et al., 2012). Please see table 4 below.

Table 4. Never married-age 35 and older for Women

'Never married' age 35 and older	1890 -	**1970**	2010
Lower	AA women	**White women**	White women – never married 8%
Higher	White women	**AA women**	AA women- never married 25%

In terms of percentage of never married men by age 45 and over, by 1960, African American men had a higher percentage compared to White men. In 2010, African American men age 45 and over who have never married was 20% compared to 9% for White men. Please see table 5 below

Table 5. Never married-age 45 and older for Men

"Never married' age 45 and older	1890 -1960	**1960**	2010
Lower	AA men	**White men**	White men- 9%
Higher	White men	**AA men**	AA men- 20%

For women, in was not until 1980 that percent of never married changed when 7% of African American never married compared to 5% for White women. In 2010, the percent of never married for African American women was 20% and 7% for White women (Elliott, D.B. et al., 2012). Please see table 6 below.

Table 6. Never married-age 45 and older for Women

"Never married' age 45 and older	1890 -1980	**1980**	2010
Lower	AA women	**White women- 5%**	White women- 7%
Higher	White women	**AA women- 7%**	AA women- 20%

The aforementioned historical evidence highlights changes that occurred during the middle of the twentieth century, 1950s-1970s that fundamentally changed and reversed the trends of median age of marriage and never married status. The trend of median age and never married has continued to increase since that particular time period, hence the uncoupling of marriage ideals and reality within the African American community.

The Second Demographic Transition

The historical data on marriage trends addresses antecedent coupling patterns and call attention to the most salient aspect of the historical data relevant to this study, the

second demographic transition noted by demographers (McLanahan, 2004). The second

demographic transition, which began around 1960s, is considered a series of shifts in

cultural norms, mores, and values surrounding relationship formation, and includes the

following: delays in fertility and marriage; increases in cohabitation, divorce, and

nonmarital childbearing; and increases in maternal employment (Cherlin, 2004 ;

McLanahan, 2004; Wax, 2007). With cultural shifts in social norms, there have been two

major after effects with implications for relationship formation.

First, given the cultural shifts in attitudes and praxis of relationship formation,

Andrew J. Cherlin (2004) has argued that over the past decades marriage has undergone a

process of deinstitutionalization as social norms have weakened the capacity to define

couples behavior. In the process of replacing the old model of engaging relationships, he

noted marriage has shifted from companionate marriage to individualized marriage,

which means it has become more of a symbol of personal achievement and status

(Cherlin, 2004). As a result of such alterations, marriage no longer holds the status of

one of the traditional markers of adulthood as it cedes to a form of adulthood defined by

personalized set of definitions (Setterstein et. Al., 2015). In a sense, this presents

opportunities for more cross-class and cross-racial marriages but also present challenges

unique to both class and race (Streib, 2015).

Secondly, in conjunction with marriage moving towards a symbol of personal

achievement and status (Cherlin, 2004), mate selection in non-marital relationships has

shifted also from ascribed characteristics (i.e. social origin, race/ethnicity, religion) to

achievement characteristics (i.e. education, experience), which speaks to the case of

assortative matching (Schwartz, 2013). According to Schwartz, assortative mating is the

nonrandom matching of individuals into relationships within groups (endogamy) or without groups (exogamy) and between people with similar (homogamy) or dissimilar (heterogamy) traits. The underpinnings of the aforementioned alternations in nonrandom matching is partially driven by an economy that favors workers with college degrees and prolonged investments in higher education to achieve financial independence.

Given such shifts both in marriage and non-marital matching towards personal achievements orientation, scholars (Arnett, 2004; Silva, 2004) have implied the loosening of traditional constraints such as gender, sexuality, and religion has removed external pressure on marriage and childbearing and has given individuals more freedom to define the course of their lives. Consequently, there has been a retreat from marriage during the past four decades along race and socioeconomic status (Schneider, 2011). However, the changes have been more pronounced in the African American community (Dixon, 2009). The historical data provided perspective of the dynamics or coupling patterns throughout the past decades around non-marital and marriage relationships and pinpointed the second demographic shift as a critical cultural event that has partially shaped the formation of relationships, yet there is a need to study African Americans separately from the general population to understand the widening divorce of marriage ideals and reality on a micro-level of analysis.

Statement of the Problem

There is a clear gap between AA's attitudes about marriage and the data that find them to be the least married group of all groups in the US. However, a review of the literature indicates there is a dearth of studies that focus on African Americans in the

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context of relationships, specifically the process of transiting from singlehood into relationships and the meanings created through social interactions. Moreover, much of what is known about African Americans coupling patterns come from a number of the other perspectives previously mentioned. Using a unique conceptual framework, the researcher explored the role early key figure-participant social interactions potentially have in informing young African Americans interactions with their significant others. In addition, the researcher explored how young African Americans used agency to create new possibilities for their current relationship.

Purpose of the Study
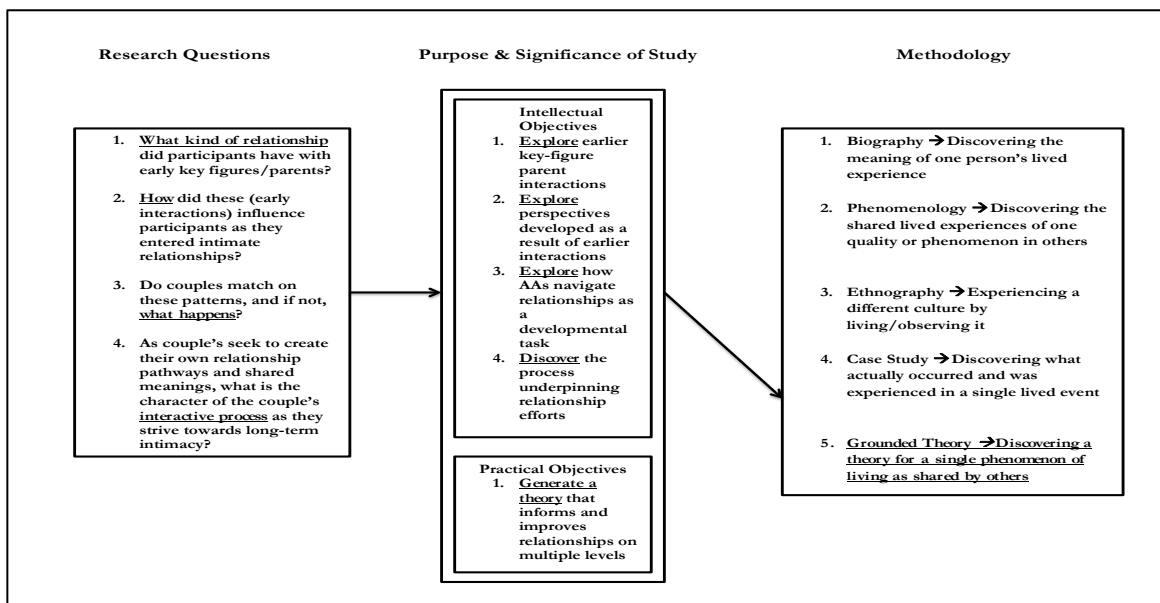
Figure 1. The Purpose, Significance of Study linked to Methodology of Study

Figure 1 provides an overview of how the study's purpose, significance, and methodology are linked. In particular, the purpose of this study was to explore if and how earlier relationships affect subsequent intimate relationships to better comprehend the

dissociation between marriage ideals and marriage reality in the African American community (Sassler, 2010; Raley et al., 2007). Specifically, four questions guided this research: (a) What kind of relationship did participants have with early key figures/parents? (b) how did these influence participants as they enter intimate relationships? (c) do couples match on these patterns, and if not, what happens? and (d) as couple's seek to create their own relationship pathways and shared meanings, what is the character of couple's interactive process as they strive towards long-term intimacy?

Significance of the Study

Intellectual Objectives

The aforementioned four questions guided the research and were underpinned by two distinctive objectives: intellectual and practical objectives (Maxwell, 2013). The intellectual objectives underlying this study were determined with the goal of exploring and understanding how earlier key figures-participant interactions informed young African Americans transitioning through relationships towards marriage in order to gain insight into the disconnect between marriage attitudes and marriage as a reality, why this is happening, and to addresses the disconnect from a human agency perspective.

The first research question, what kind of relationship did participants have with early key figures, endeavored to answer the question of early key figure-participants social interactions as reference groups and the effects of such early interactions in potentially shaping the process of transitioning through relationships towards marriage. One family scholar suggested the experience of relationships in family of orientation is often repeated with future partners and children (McGoldrick, 2011). However true this

may be, researchers have called for more research on how earlier relationships affect subsequent intimate relationships (Raley et al., 2007).

The second research question, how did these (family backgrounds as reference groups) influence participants as they entered intimate relationships, attempted to explore the perspectives developed as a result of the earlier key figure social interactions. Were the overall perspectives positive, or negative? How did participants perceive their gendered roles in context of the relationship? What were some needs, desires, wants that shaped their relationship outlook as a result of earlier key figure interactions? Did their developed perspectives present challenges and competition with their partner and how did such experiences help participants reckon with the realities and demands of their partner? This study entered the dialogue of scholarly conversation to stimulate discourse around the realities of early primary relationships in the African American community and how such patterns perhaps form, to an extent, the underlying processes in the intimate relationship formation stage. Consequently, to change reoccurring patterns, one particular clinician-scholar argued the importance of exploring the origins of the relational patterns in order to appreciate their power (E. Thembley, 1996).

The third question, do couples match on these patterns, and if not, what happens, ventured to explore relationship formation as a key developmental tasks. Critical to the differences in matches for some couples will be their ability to cultivate the following tasks in fostering intimacy: effectively negotiating expectations for the relationship, negotiating roles and responsibilities, making compromises, identifying and meeting individual needs, identifying and meeting partnership needs, effectively resolving conflict and solving problems (Hutchison, 2015).

The fourth question, as couple's seek to create their own relationship pathways and shared meanings, what is the character of couple's interactive process as they strive towards long-term intimacy, attempted to explore the underlying series of actions, roles, stages, and timing in an exercise to create and maintain long-term intimacy, particularly with the goal of marriage in mind.

Practical Objectives

The practical objectives underpinning this study were determined with the goal to generate a theory that was both, understandable and experientially credible to certain young African American couples who experienced a disconnect between marriage ideals and reality and also credible to the academic community. In addition, the second practical objective was determined with the goal to advise or improve relationships, programs, and policy practices that influences the process of relationship formation. In particular, the objective was to impart to young African American couples on how unresolved issues from earlier primary relationships, if unaddressed, could potentially manifest in current intimate relationships by shaping and/or stunting intimate relationship goals, bringing confusion to role expectations, and prematurely discontinuing important relationship transitions. In reference to the family unit, the objective was to educate couples on the importance of family dynamics and bring awareness to them in order to thrive. Furthermore, this research may inform policies that effect parent-child bonding in the workplace such as maternal and paternal leave, but also promote, support, and nurture parenting skills and child development on different political levels which has potential to influence children's future intimate relationships. Lastly, the researcher's long term goals

was to create a couple's mentoring-coaching program that helps individuals increase personal awareness and self-understanding while breaking destructive relationship patterns, build appreciation for how relationship patterns in family history impact intimate relationships, and emphasize the power of agency in closing the gap between marriage attitudes and reaching the goal of quality marriage in praxis.

Conceptual Framework
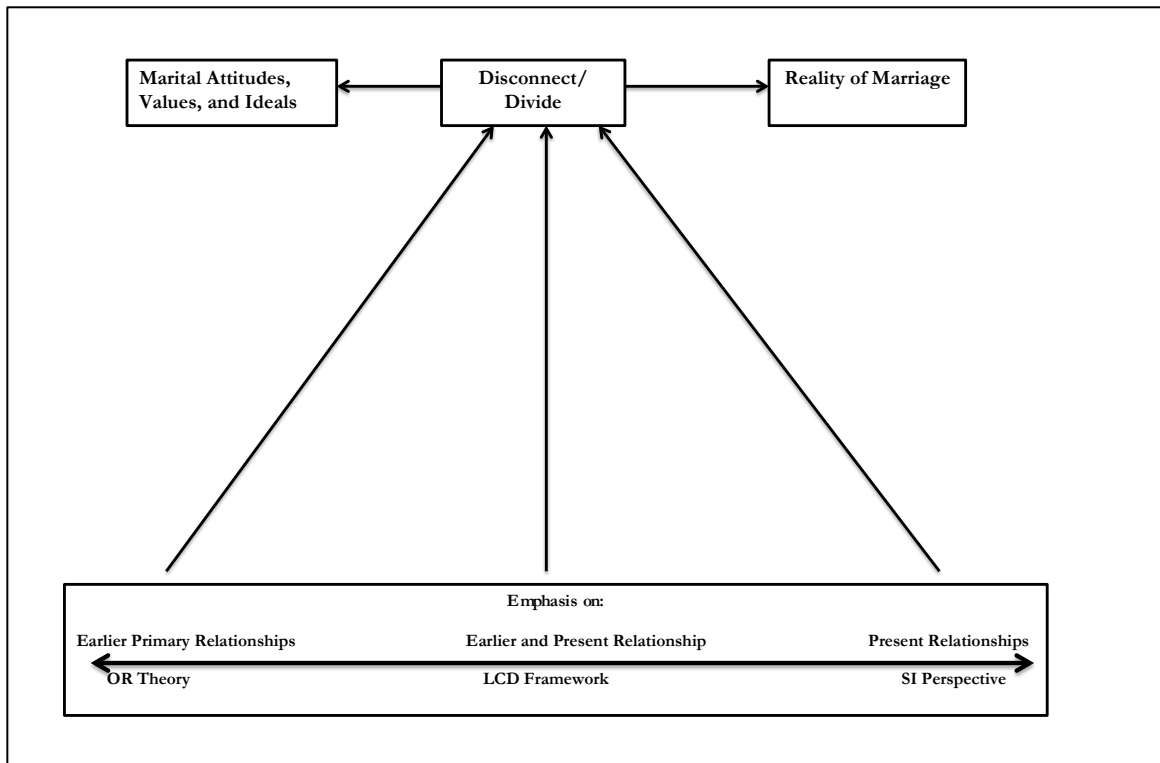
Figure 2. Unique Conceptual Framework

Figure 2 illustrates the major theoretical orientations used to explore the research problem. Object relation theorists posit early experiences have great formative power, and adult problems often have their source in childhood experiences (Thembley, 1996).

Complementary to object relations theory's view on the formative power of early experiences is the life course development framework's emphasis on two important concepts relevant to this research study: transitions, and relationship formation as a key developmental task (Charon, 2010; White, Klein, Martin, 2015). Although Object Relations Theory and life course developmental framework addresses the earlier aspects of relationships from childhood, Symbolic Interaction perspective breaks from the two aforementioned theoretical frameworks by shifting focus to social interactions in the present and emphasizing the active nature of human beings through the power of agency (Charon, 2010). There will be an in-depth discussion in the following chapter featuring the unique conceptual framework.

Methodology

Charmaz's (2014) grounded theory approach was used to develop a middle-range theory that provided a more thorough understanding of first, if or how earlier family backgrounds influence young African American couples transitioning through the challenges and opportunities of intimate relationships, and second how young African Americans use their agency to create long-term intimacy. The rigor of this research study was evaluated by credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). A theoretical and convenience sampling strategy was used to recruit 16 African American couples between the ages of 22 and 40 primarily from southern California. Individual interviews were the primary method for data collection. All interviews were audio taped and transcribed. Data analysis included open coding, coding by interpretation and meaning, and axial coding to develop the middle-range theory.

Limitations

Although this research contributes to parent-child relationships, and couple's relationship in the African American community, it is not without its limitations. The most obvious of which is the use of self-reports by the participants. The self-reports from their perception of events may or may not be an accurate description of how parent-child relationship and their effects on the couple's relationship interactions in real social situations. In addition, given the transient nature of this sample, majority of them residing in California only because of educational pursuits, there was not sufficient time or participants to conduct a focus group. The focus group would have been able to provide further nuanced patterns concerning the connection between parents and participants as it relates to their relationships. Finally, the study design is not without limits as the in-depth aim and focus only allows generalization of results within a small region, southern California, as it relates to the overall population of the African American community, mostly east of the Mississippi river.

Summary

This chapter provided an introduction to African American couples valuing marriage yet current statistics presented a stark reality as marital chasms between African Americans and other racial groups and also marital goal chasm between the relationship goal of marriage and actual relationship praxis. Given this context, the problem statement expressed the issues that was explored in this study. The purpose of this study was guided by four research questions and underpinned by intellectual and practical objectives. Informed by a unique conceptualization, the lens allowed for the exploration of the

different dynamics and nature of the parent-child relationships nature, legacy of such earlier interactions in current intimate relationships praxis, and the social agency of creating new shared meaning towards long-term intimacy. The methodology allowed for the best and accurate qualitative evidence to generate a theory in regards to young African American couples creatively navigating intimate relationships, non-marital and marital, through the co-construction of relationship goals.

CHAPTER TWO

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The process of constructing a conceptual framework is framed itself by the study's research goals. Employing three complementary, yet distinctive theories, Object Relations Theory and The Life Course Developmental Framework, and Symbolic Interaction perspective provided the best fitting conceptual framework in order to achieve the principal goals of this study. Furthermore, it serves as guide to selecting areas of focus and modes of inquiry (Boss et. Al, 2004). Prior to an in-depth discussion, a short appraisal of theoretical dimensions will allow for differentiation to how the aforementioned theories will be advanced in the study. This section will review and apply the concepts from the chosen theories, show how the concepts are interrelated, and discuss how the theoretical frameworks have been used in existing studies.

There are seven types of theory used in the family field and they are not all generated with a similar scope and degree of abstraction. The seven theories are: metatheories, conceptual frameworks, analytical typologies, formal propositional theories, middle-range theories, causal models, and empirical generalizations. Metatheories, in general, are broad in scope of content and high in abstracted global concepts (Boss et. Al, 2004). Such theories involve the entire field of knowledge in Family Studies juxtaposed a smaller scope like that of this study's topic: Young African Americans creatively navigating through relationships towards marriage (Boss et. Al, 2004). Metatheories are broad in scope and high in level of abstractness and most of the family theories fall under that category of theories. Also, the aforementioned is usually a framework derived from outside the field of Family Studies.

Although Conceptual frameworks provide focus and inquiry, they must be filled in by specific theories and data in certain areas (Boss et. Al, 2004). Analytical typologies provide representations of features of the social world and are considered more abstract than middle-range theories because of their application to a broad scope of content area (Boss et. Al, 2004). Formal Propositional Theories are a set of abstract statements with the purpose of explaining certain types of phenomena. The propositions range from the more abstract to the specific (Boss et. Al, 2004). Middle-range theories while more abstract then causal models and empirical generalizations, are not as broad in scope of content or as high along the abstract gradient like Metatheories. Middle-range theories are confined to a particular domain and tested by a variety of studies as well as methods (Boss et. Al, 2004).

Causal Models are usually more complex empirical generalizations or models that are tested in a study, often times by means of path analysis or structural equation modeling (Boss et. Al, 2004). Empirical Generalization are summaries of research finding linked to other research findings and to some general ideas about a research topic. Empirical generalizations are lowest along the level of abstraction gradient and narrowest along the scope of content (Boss et. Al, 2004).

Even though theory plays a significant role in understanding young African Americans navigating non-marital intimate relationships, theories and results are often partial, misleading, or simply wrong (Maxwell, 2013). To best apply theory accurately in the representation and comprehension of young African Americans creatively navigating non-marital intimate relationships, this study will focus on three primary areas. First, theory is reified as concrete embodiment in African-American males and female

interactions within the context of intimate relationships.. Second, intimate relationship

formation is considered as the partial construct of early primary relationships effects

potentially shaping motivations to meet personal intimate and relationship needs and

goals. Finally, theory is used as an interest in the patterns, principles, or regularities

underlying the very dynamics of non-marital intimate relationship formation process.

Figure 3 below provides an illustration of how the unique conceptual framework is linked

to answering the research questions.
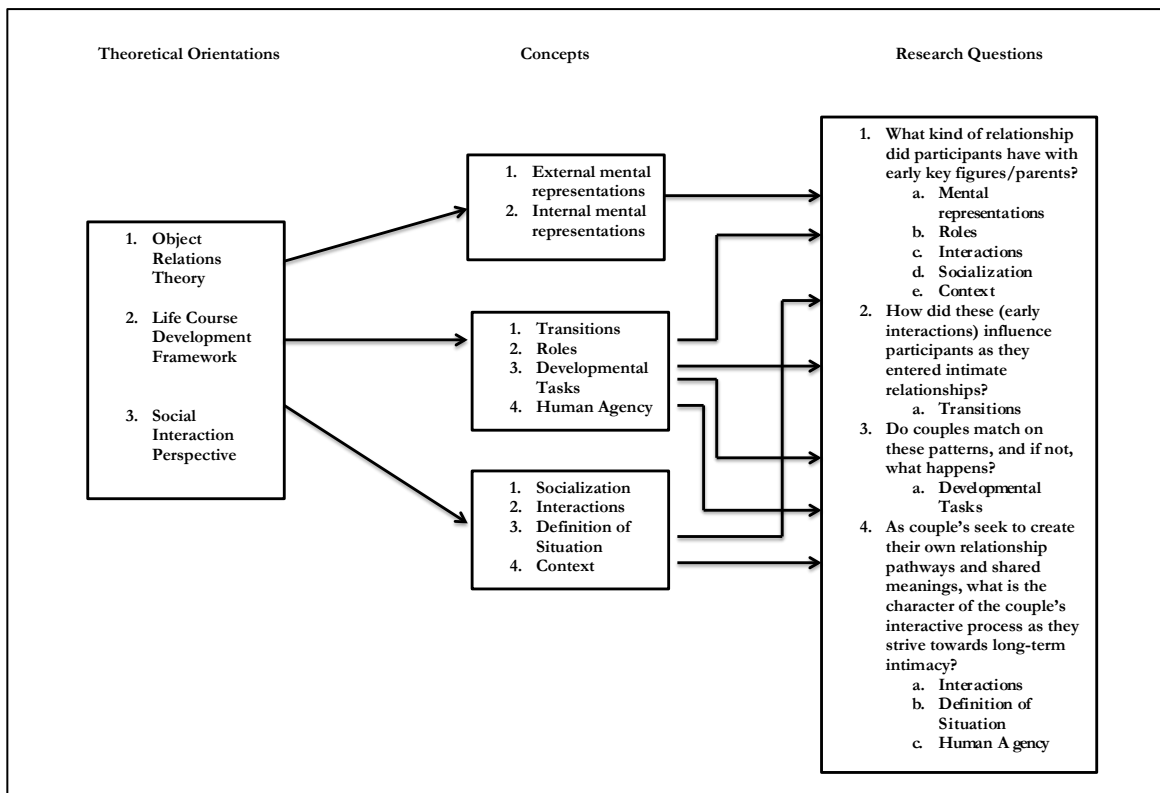
Figure 3. Unique Conceptual Framework linked to Research Questions

Object Relation Theory

Object Relations Theory is one of four main theoretical models of psychodynamic

therapy, which consist of: self psychology, ego psychology, attachment theory and object relations theory (Frankland, 2013). The term 'object,' coined by Freud in 1905, means invested emotion in a person, place, thing, or fantasy (Hamilton, 1990). In addition, the term 'object' is used to advance the idea that sometimes people do not perceive others as they are, but rather as they imagine them to be. This speaks to individuals having a two-dimensional object/person in their minds, which is sometimes inaccurate (Frankland, 2013).

Object relations theory provides a framework that focuses primarily on how early relationships influence current interpersonal relationships. In addition, Object relations theory investigates how representation of significant others and self-representation relate to interpersonal functioning. This framework consists of a family of interrelated concepts: self-representation, part objects and whole objects, splitting, structures, self and mental representation. For this study, the concept of interest is mental representation. Mental representation consists of two concepts: external and internal object representation.

Object relations theory has two primary assumptions relevant to this study. The first assumption posits that humans are primarily motivated by the need for contact with others – the need to form relationships (Goldstein, 2001). The second important assumption advances the idea that individuals interact not only with an actual other (significant other) but also with an internal other; an internal representation that most likely have some inaccuracies and distortions of the actual person (Frankland, 2013). The two aforementioned assumptions gives aim to understand current relationship functioning from a developmental and internal perspective.

Mental Representation Concept

The concept of mental representation calls scholarly attention to the external and internal world of individuals specifically focusing on the inner/mental representations of objects. Mental representations consist of object representation and self-representation (Frankland, 2013; Hamilton, 1990). The inner experience and representation may not be available to the researcher or an accurate reflection of the person or actual situation, however it represents one's experience of relating to a significant other (St. Clair, 2004). In addition, this concept speaks to how individuals represent and understand the world in his/her own relationships, which allows researchers to understand the individual's behavior and motivation (St. Clair, 2004). There will be an in-depth discussion on the concept of mental representation in the Literature Review section. For the purposes of this study, the researcher will use this concept to explore the two-dimensional object representation of young African Americans in reference to significant others and earlier primary relationships of parental figures to see how their image of role expectations, transitions, and intimacy needs and goals influence their relational functions.

The Life Course Developmental Framework

The life course developmental framework provides a broad theory concerning time, process, and context in relationship to the family unit (Elder, 1994). In further detail, it looks at how life transitions, chronological age, social change, and relationships shape people's lives throughout their lifespans (Hutchison, 2015). The concepts central to this framework includes lives and historical times, the timing of lives, linked lives, human agency, family change and development, norms, and roles (Elder, 1994; White,

Klein, Martin, 2015) The life course developmental perspective sees humans as capable

of making choices and constructing their own life journeys within systems of

opportunities and constraints, it emphasizes diversity in life journeys and the many

sources of that diversity, and recognizes the linkages between early life experiences and

later experiences in adulthood. It attempts to understand the continuities as well as the

twists and turns in the paths of individual lives, and finally it recognizes the influence of

historical changes on human behavior (Hutchison, 2015).

Transitions

The concept of transition combines the concepts of stage, event, and time (Boss et

al., 2004). Transitions are considered shifts from one family stage to another family stage

and indicated by the events between the stages. The transition from one stage to the next

stage is regulated by process norms as opposed to static norms. Norms are socially

constructed rules that govern group and individual behavior (White, Klein, Martin, 2015).

Static norms regulate what goes on inside a particular stage juxtaposed process norms

that regulate transitions between stages. There are different subtypes of process norms.

One type of process norm regulates the sequence/order in which events or stages should

be traversed by individuals, relationships, and families. Another type of process norm

regulates the timing of events and stages (Boss et. Al., 2004).

Timing as Normative

Timing, closely linked to transitions, is significant in measuring individuals,

relationships, and families. The concept of timing speaks to timing norms juxtaposed

measuring chronology. A timing norm addresses the fact of expected and behaviorally followed particular events or accomplishments in a given society for an individual, relationship, or family. The notion of "on time" and "off time" is part of the concept of timing norms as opposed to the measure of time (Boss et. Al., 2004).

Age Timing

Although age is considered to be the simplest measure of time, it is also confusing. The misperception comes from the idea that only individuals have the attribute of age. While all individuals have a beginning, relationships and families do so as well. The event that marks the beginning of an individual is birth. The event that marks the beginning of a dating relationship includes meeting an attractive person and the birth of a child mark the beginning of parental and/or sibling relationships. Therefore, individuals, relationships, and families can all be described by their age (Boss et. Al., 2004).

Events

Family life events are usually discrete significant occurrences such as births, deaths, cohabitation, weddings, relocations, divorces, remarriage, and first child leaving home (Boss et. Al., 2004;White, Klein, & Martin, 2015) Developmental scholars have used events as measures for life transitions (Boss et. Al, 2004). Events are also considered the transition points between life stages, which consist of a relative sharp disjunction between what precedes and what follows (Boss et. Al, 2004; Allison, 1984). Not all events have impacts on individuals and families especially the ones that do not have developmental implications. For the events with developmental implications,

timing, frequency, and sequencing of events can be helpful in explaining diverse life course pathways and life course outcomes (White, Klein, & Martin, 2015). The type of events that will provide support to this study is developmental events. A developmental event, also considered to be transitional events, have implications regarding the qualitatively different normative expectations in the role content of family relationships as a result of the event.

Although events have a chronological date attached, the date carries little significance apart from the event (White, Klein, & Martin, 2015). The social environment gives meaning to the passage of events. The course of life is itself socially defined. Life events become social institutions themselves as sufficient numbers of the population experience them. It is events that causes change, not merely a chronological date or progression of years (Boss et Al., 2004).

Event and Stage Sequences

The order of events and stages has important family consequences. For instance, marriage to birth of child to divorce has different family consequences compared to the sequence of birth to marriage to divorce. While event signals the beginning or end of a relationship stage, events alone are not sufficient indicators for a stage because the event may mark the beginning of an entirely different relationship or family stage. Developmental sequencing becomes complicated by cross-institutional normative sequences. For instance, it is really important to note that expectations of finishing school, getting a job before marriage and having a baby is different than family developmental sequencing developmental norms (Boss et. Al., 2004).

Roles

Roles are considered either prescribed, permitted, preferred, or prohibited complementary sets of expectations for behavior (Boss et. Al, 2004). Roles specify not only expectations about proper extent, direction, and duration of feelings and emotions but also about knowledge, ability, and motivation. Roles may vary in their relation to social position. For instance, formal roles refer to position within social organizations, groups, or institutions. Informal roles identify an interactional or interpersonal position that may not necessarily be understood by others. Roles are considered permeable and flexible boundaries in which individuals may construct different identities in a role. In addition, roles are not static but can change over time. Past experiences and events may give shape and form to the content of roles in the present. Furthermore, the career of a role may operate in the reverse order; present experiences and events can give shape and form to the content of roles in the past (Boss et al., 2004).

Developmental Tasks

The formation of intimate relationships is an important life course process and a key developmental task during emerging adulthood (Amato and Booth, 1997; Arnett 2004; Hutchison, 2015; Meir, Hull and Ortyl 2009). In particular, establishing satisfying long-term relationships is one of the main challenges of early adulthood (Warner et. Al., 2011). In addition, establishing long-term intimacy and relationships is a multifaceted process. Hutchison (2015) noted a few tasks involved in fostering an intimate relationship with a partner: effectively negotiating expectations for the relationship, negotiating roles and responsibilities, making compromises, prioritizing and upholding values, deciding

how much to share with oneself, identifying and meeting individual needs, identifying and meeting partner needs, renegotiating identity, developing trust and security, allowing for reciprocal communication, making time commitments to partner, effectively resolving conflict and solving problems, and demonstrating respect, support, and care. The aforementioned tasks depend not only on personal abilities but external abilities such as an individual's family background (Hutchison, 2015).

Human Agency

Transitions into non-marital intimate relationships through the lenses of human agency helps researchers examine how young African-Americans, within constraints of influencing structural, cultural, and individual factors make plans and relationship choices among the options available to them (Elder, 1994; Clausen, 1993). Monica McGoldrick (2011) suggested people are always doing the best they can within the limitations of their respective perspectives. Albert Bandura (2006) presented a model for exploring human agency: Psychology of Human Agency. Bandura noted four core properties of human agency: intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness. The four core properties were based on his assumption: people are self-organizing, proactive, self-regulating, and self-reflecting and they are not only onlookers of their behaviors but contributors to their life pathways (Bandura, 2006).

Symbolic Interaction Perspective

Intellectual Traditions from Pragmatism

The perspective of symbolic interactionism grew out of the work of George

Herbert Mead, his student Herbert Blumer, and other pragmatists (Charon, 2010; White, Klein, Martin, 2015). Four major ideas are important in highlighting the premises of pragmatists, which are heavily influenced by the work of Charles Darwin and behaviorism (Charon, 2010; White, Klein, Martin, 2015). First, pragmatists believe that humans do not respond to their environment; instead, they almost always interpret their environment (Charon, 2010). The world does not tell a person what is; one has to actively reach out and understand it and decide what to do with it. In order terms, perception is reality or what humans define as real has real consequences (White, Klein, Martin, 2015; Thomas and Thomas, 1928). The second idea assumes that humans believe something according to its usefulness in situations that they encounter. Pragmatists believe knowledge is learned, remembered, and believed in relation to one's ability to successfully apply it. Thirdly, pragmatists believe that one is selective in what is noticed in every situation (Charon, 2010). Objects noticed, are defined according to their usefulness. Fourth, pragmatists focus on human action when they study human beings (Charon, 2010).

Core Principles of Symbolic Interactionism

The core concepts of symbolic interactionism can be summarized as: identity, self, mind, taking the role of the other, social interactions, definition of society, and context (Boss et. Al., 2004; Charon, 2010; White, Klein, Martin, 2015). The concepts relevant to this study includes: socialization, social interactions, definition of situation, and context.

The concept of socialization is considered to be the process by which individuals

acquire the symbols, beliefs, and attitudes of culture (Boss et. Al., 2004). Mead talked about the process as the "importation" of social symbols into the mind as part of the development of the generalized other: "Mind is nothing but the importation of this external process into the conduct of the individual so as to meet the problems that arise" (Boss et. Al., 2004). Mead also described the use of symbols to be one's very essence. Symbolic communication both between people and within the person is the core to one's reality, society, and distinctly human qualities. Symbols underscore the importance of meaning. Meaning arises in the process of interaction between people. Meanings are handled in and modified through an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with things he or she encounters (Boss et. Al., 2004).

The Centrality of social interaction expresses human beings as actors who interact with one another, and this ongoing interaction influences what we do in situations and it also becomes the source of human society. Social interaction does not mean that others simply influence us, but it is a mutual social process towards one another that matters (Charon, 2010). It is through social interactions that individuals apply broad shared symbols and actively create the specific meanings of self, others, and situations. Furthermore, the "drama" of social interaction results from the fact that individuals are aware that others are assessing their self-presentations and that, consequently, blatant efforts at manipulation may be discounted. Thus, *impression management*, as it is sometimes called, operates on several levels of reflexivity (Boss et. Al., 2004).

The definition of the situation refers to the dictum that what we define as real will have real consequences. The definition of the situation sensitizes symbolic interactionists to the role of perception in forming our behavior. In addition, this concept focuses on the

problem-solving interaction with the environment rather than on isolated internal mental processes. In addition to the meanings given to self and others, there are meanings attributed to situations. "A definition of the situation focuses attention on what is salient about an interactive setting and permits a preliminary organization of actions appropriate to that setting" (Boss et. Al., 2004; Stryker & Statham, 1985, p.322). The processes involved in the creation of more or less shared definitions of situations are instrumental to the success of any group or society. It is important to realize, however, that complete agreement is rarely, if ever, achieved and that almost always social life proceeds with people being satisfied with what might be termed a "working consensus." There are five definitions or working consensus that all families must negotiate: (1) establishing a pattern of separateness and connectedness, (2) establishing a satisfactory congruence of images through the exchange of suitable testimony, (3) evolving modes of interaction into central family concerns or themes, (4) establishing the boundaries of the family's world of experience, and (5) dealing with significant biosocial issues of family life, as in the family's disposition to evolve definitions of male and female [or, more accurately, masculine and feminine] and of older and younger (Boss et. Al., 2004; Hess & Handel, 1959, p.4)

The concept of context finds theoretical value in aligning actions that allows for both determinacy and indeterminacy. Probably the most explicitly articulated effort in contemporary symbolic interactionism to delineate the connection between the individual and society is "the negotiated order approach" to social organization (Boss et. Al., 2004; Strauss, 1978). Three concepts constitute the foundation of this approach: negotiation, negotiation context, and structural context. Negotiation refers to the many ways of

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"getting things accomplished" and includes activities such as bargaining, compromising, and engaging in collusion. Negotiation context refers to the structural properties that enter most immediately into the course of negotiation. Structural context impacts directly on the negotiation context and is the larger, generally societal level, "within which" negotiations take place (Boss et. Al., 2004;Strauss, 1978, p. 98-99). A central tenet of the negotiated order approach, one that is in keeping with symbolic interactionism's perennial interest in the dialectical link between the individual and society, is that the relationship between negotiation and negotiation context and structural context is reciprocal. Thus, the flow of influence may move from the microlevel (the level of negotiations) to the macrolevel (the structural context), and vice versa (Boss et. Al., 2004; Strauss, 1978, p.101).

Summary

This current study employed life course developmental framework, object relations theory, and symbolic interaction perspective because the three theoretical orientations provided complementary and rich insights into understanding and exploring relationship formation in the African American community. The three theoretical orientations are complementary but distinct and emphasize different components of human nature and relationships relevant to this study. All three theoretical orientations call attention to the formative power of early relationships Object relations posit that mental representations, or noted as symbols in symbolic interactionism, begin early in life. Object relations theory emphasizes that one of the primary needs of humans is to form relationship with others. That need is informed first, by the experience of earlier

relationships/social interactions with key figures, and second, by interactions with others. However, it advances the idea that the interactions are both, with an actual other, but also with an internal other/ or internal representation that most likely have inaccuracies and distortions of the actual person. This is in reference to concept of symbols and how the importation of social symbols into the mind is part of developing the generalized other. In order to overcome inaccuracies and distortions acquired from socialization, as posited by symbolic interactionism, life course development framework notes that a key developmental task is undergoing a series of transitions [stage, events, time] individuals interact and use of agency [intentionality, forethought, self-reflectiveness, and self-reactiveness] allows individuals a quest to move beyond the inaccuracies and distortions of internal representations/symbols to create shared meaning from new symbols. Therefore, social interaction, and defining situations through negotiation is very important in order to engage in long-term intimate relationships. Social interaction, human agency, transitions, developmental tasks all give reference to the fact that while early parent-child interactions indeed have formative powers, they do not spell doom or destiny when two individuals from different systems of symbols [i.e. family backgrounds] unite with the goal of long-term intimacy in non-martial relationships and marriage.

CHAPTER THREE

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

"Man is always torn between the wish to regress to the womb and the wish to be fully born" -Erich Fromm

Overview

This chapter reviews the literature on the topic of young African Americans transitioning through intimate relationships. Through this literature review as a backdrop, a rationale for this study is constructed. While scholars have focused on sociological, developmental, and interpersonal factors salient to the shaping of differences in marital rates within the African American community (Dixon 2009, Pinderhughes 2002, Pinsof, 2002), further research is still needed to clarify how early relationships affect subsequent intimate relationships, specifically among young African American couples (Raley et. Al, 2007). The following review of literature represents the literature pertinent to this particular research study. Specifically, Chapter three is organized into five sections (a) Framing of the Research Problem, (b) Life Course Developmental Framework, (c) Assortative Mating, (d) Object Relations Theory, and (e) Symbolic Interaction Perspective.

Components of Literature Review	Content	Research Problem

Framing of the Research Problem

1. Theories
2. Models
3. Frameworks
4. Extant structural, cultural, and individual factors

Life Course Developmental Framework

1. Life Course Events
2. Timing of Transitions
3. Socio-spatial context of transitions
4. Roles
5. Gender roles

Assortative Mating

1. Racial Homogamy
2. Educational Homogamy

Object Relations Theory

1. Concept of representation
2. Types of mental representation
3. Object representation and the AA family
4. Object representation and intimate relationships

Symbolic Interaction Perspective

1. Emphasis on interactions
2. Limited amount of research

There is a disconnect between marital values, ideals and attitudes with marital reality as evidenced by empirical data among young adult African Americans

Figure 4. Literature Review Map

Existing Studies of African American Coupling Patterns

A review of the literature on relationship formation indicates marital delay, the increase and acceptance in the practice of cohabitation, high divorce rates, high rates of relationship dissolution coupled with new relationship opportunity structures have extended the amount of time Americans spend outside of marital unions (Sassler 2010). Although marriage is considered a respectable choice rather than a necessity for intimacy, companionship, and children (Cherlin, 2004), some researchers have become alarmed at the rate of African-Americans spending considerable time outside of marriage (Dixon, 2009). The research gives evidence to African Americans spending more time outside of

marriage than any other racial group in the United States (Dixon, 2009). Scholars have framed the deleterious effects of low marital rates in general and also in the African American community as follows: a social crisis and national concern due to absence of fathers (Rector, 2010); an issue of race, gender, class based on an interlocking system of discrimination and racism (Johnson & Loscocco, 2015; Weber, 1998); cumulative disadvantage from the institution of slavery (Patterson, 1998; Pinderhughes, 2002; Pinsoff; 2002); due to historical effects (Cherlin, 2005); desinstitutionalization of marriage (Cherlin, 2004); and diverging destinies of families along social class status (McLaughan, 2004).

Theories, Models, and Frameworks

Multiple theories. Models, and frameworks have been used to frame the low marital rates in the African American community. Scholars have used the following theories to bring attention to different aspects of this complex issue: The imbalanced sex ratio theory, economic-provider hypothesis, the adult-transition hypothesis, the benefits-of-early-marriage hypothesis, social exchange theory, mating gradient theory, and parental investment model.

The Imbalanced Sex Ratio theory (Warner et. Al., 2011; South, 1992) is broadly defined as the ratio of males to females in a particular geographic area, which is associated with the likelihood of marriage, risk of divorce, and rates of nonmarital child-bearing. It has been linked to entry into and out of marriage. This theory suggests that the sex in short supply has greater bargaining power and thus relationship formation is influenced by the sex with the greatest dyadic power. Secondly, the Economic-provider

hypothesis (Dixon, 2009; Koball, 1998) has been used mostly to explain the trend toward later marriage for African American men. Economic –provider hypothesis states that because men have traditionally been primary economic providers in marriage, they are more likely to marry when they have full time employment. Considerable evidence supports this hypothesis. Thirdly, the Adult-transition hypothesis (Dixon, 2009; Koball, 1998) states that marriage enables individuals to attain adult status. However, there are events that interfere with first age of marriage for men. The two events that delay adult roles are: school enrollment and military service.

In continuation, the Benefits-of-Early-Marriage hypothesis has been proposed and tested by scholars. The Benefits-of-Early-Marriage hypothesis (Dixon, 2009; Koball, 1998) states that young men delay marriage when the benefits of marriage decrease. Two twentieth century trends are hypothesized to have reduced the benefits of early marriage for men through reducing the benefits of large families: education and southern residence. Several authors (Caldwell, 1980; Koball, 1998; Vogl, 2015) have argued that mass education have induced widespread changes in fertility norms. With children being required by law to go to school, they spend more time at school instead of working to contribute to the family and consequently, they become more of an economic burden rather than an economic contribution to the family economy. In reference to southern residency, scholars (Bloome & Muller, 2015; Koball, 1998; Landale and Tolnay, 1991) have shown that tenant farming as an economic institution in the South after slavery encouraged African Americans to get married early. However, the great migration out of the South through the 1950s may have disrupted this trend.

Social exchange theory has also been vital in explaining the low marriage rates in

the African American community. Social exchange theory posits that people choose mates based on the most rewards and the least costs (White, Klein, Martin, 2015). In addition, scholars also surveyed low marriage rates in the African American community using the Mating gradient theory, which states that potential husbands are expected to be superior to their wives in education, income and career achievement (Dixon, 2009). Thirdly, the Parental investment model have been employed and states that males seek young, healthy, and nurturing female partners and females seek males who have resources or characteristics (e.g. intelligence, education, ambition) needed to obtain resources so that they are able to maximize their parental capacities for the survival of their offspring (Dixon, 2009). However, expecting potential mates to be superior in education and income may be an unrealistic goal for African American women.

Even though the aforementioned theories provide rich insight into various dynamics of intimate relationships between African-American men and women, far too little attention has been given in respects to how object representations developed from parent-child relationships and partially shapes the mating process among young African-Americans. Furthermore, there is a need to explore how young African Americans are being intentional and resourceful in creatively navigating non-marital intimate relationships.

Extant Factors Affecting Coupling Patterns

Structural Factors

Several studies have highlighted certain structural factors salient to the understanding of delayed and declining marital rates in the African-American community

(Chambers & Kravitz, 2011; Dixon, 2009; Eyre et al., 2012). The two overarching

structural factors include an imbalanced sex ratio between African American males and

females, and the marginalization of African-American males from the labor force which,

partially influence coupling patterns (Dixon, 2009). African Americans experience the

same trends like all other racial and social groups in the United States (lifespan, women's

expanded economic and reproductive choices, and social/legal values) but only more so

with disparities in sex ratio and male employment (Pinsof, 2002).

Although there is diversity in mating behavioral patterns among African

American men and African American women, the theory of Imbalanced sex ratio

provides one of many frameworks for partially explaining such behaviors. Social

scientists have used two different sex ratio hypotheses, The Classical sex ratio hypothesis

and the Alternative sex ratio hypothesis to examine mating behavior (Stone et al., 2006).

The Classical-sex-ratio-mate-preference-shifts hypothesis predicts the more numerous

sex, African American women, will more likely lower their standards to facilitate

acquisition of a partner of the less numerous sex, African American men (Stone et al.,

2006; Dixon, 2009). The Alternative-sex-ratio-mate-preference-shifts hypothesis predicts

men will lower their standards to secure more short-term relationships, whereas women

will raise their standards to avoid deception by men seeking short-term relationships

(Stone et al., 2006). The focus on imbalanced sex ratio speaks to how the bargaining

power of the sex in short supply strengthens in dyadic and structural power to influence

gender dynamics (Simons et al, 2011; Warner et al., 2011).

Chambers (2008) has traced the implications of the imbalanced sex ratio in the

African American community. The disparities, purportedly, has been a source of conflict

in reference to power struggles and leadership in intimate relationships (Black, 1999;

Boyd-Franklin, 1998; Chambers, A.L., Kravitz, A., 2011; Hatchett, Veroff, & Doucan,

1995; Pinderhughes, 1998, 2002). In addition to power struggles and leadership, gender

role confusion becomes a contributing factor to stress on the dyadic system, as the man

may feel emasculated and has little to no influence in the decision-making process

(Chambers, A.L., Kravitz, A., 2011; Hatchett et al., 1995; McLloyd, Cauce, Tacheuchi, &

Wilson, 2000). Such power struggles and gender role confusion presents educated

African-American women with limited options to assortative mating that favor the more-

educated families (McLanahan, 2004).

The second structural factor impacting the African American community more

then all other racial groups is the marginalization of male employment (Dixon, 2009).

Financial strain, in particular, is a critical factor among African-Americans because they

are disproportionately impoverished in the United States (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor &

Smith, 2009). Scholars have noted marriage rates of African Americans decline following

increased levels of unemployment among African American men (Bryant et al., 2010).

Yet, the rate of marriage increases significantly as African Americans' level of education

increases (Chambers, A., Kravitz, A., 2011).

Education has been considered an important indicator in determining an

individual's place in society but also economic status (Rosenfield, Pew Research Report

2015). The economic status and education link have long correlated with marriage rates

for men, with higher earning and better educated men more likely to marry (Wax, 2007).

Education tends to increase both men and women's probability of marrying (Schoen &

Cheng, 2006) but has a stronger effect on young men's marriage (Sassler & Schoen,

1999). However, those with higher levels of education are less willing to marry someone who has been married or already have children (Goldscheider & Kaufman, 2006).

Cultural Factors

Cultural factors that have influenced intimate relationship trends among African Americans have referenced as: advances in contraceptive technology; sperm-donor and surrogate-mother arrangements; increased opportunities in the labor force for women; innovations in home production; legal changes in divorce laws; an increased lifespan; delays in fertility and marriage; normalization in cohabitation; non-marital childbearing and high divorce rates; the sexual revolution; the feminist movement; LGBTQ movement; acceptance of cohabitation; and capitalistic-consumerism have all made contributions to the changing social norms influencing mating patterns and family arrangements (Cherlin, 2005; Coontz, 2000; Dixon, 2009; McLanahan, 2004; Pinsof, 2002; Schwartz, 2013). McClain (2007) asserted that marriage addresses the problem of natural differences and inequalities between men and women in respect to their investment in children and in each other. While the changing social norms may or may not have been intended to affect marriage, ideas have shifted concerning how families should be organized. Marriage has become only an option in a multitude of relationship arrangements and consequently has become less of an imperative or priority (Raley, Sweeney, Wondra, 2015).

The institution of marriage has transitioned from a companionate way of arranging legal intimate relationships to a symbolism of self-development post second demographic shift (Barr, A. et al, 2015; Cherlin, 2004). In addition, the institution of

marriage is considered by some scholars to be the place where marriage politics intersect with racial politics within the United States. Among African Americans, marriage is perceived to be a symbol of respectable citizenship, given the legacy of historical injustice levied on intimate relationships affecting community solidarity (Barr, A. et al, 2015). Marriage, though individuals are more selective in terms of whom enters, no longer organizes most major life transitions. Scholars have discovered cohabitation to be a common practice that is becoming the norm and generally accepted in the public mind (Guzzo, K., 2014).

Cohabitation has become critical to the understanding of cultural influences on low marital rates as it has become a central practice in relationships for both adults and children (Manning, 2015). By age 25, 55% of women cohabit, by age 30, 51% of African American women cohabit (Bar el al., 2015). In addition, 56% of non-marital births today are to cohabiting couples (Lichter, Sassler, & Turner, 2014). In particular, 36.9% of AA cohabiters accounted for a small minority of non-marital compared to their White and Hispanic counterparts. Non-marital childbearing among AA women are less likely to occur with both parents living together, which may potentially have implications for AA children's developmental trajectory and economic well-being (Waller & Dwyer, 2012). Other scholars have proposed African American cohabiting partners are more likely to share children compared to their White counterparts (Lofquist et. Al., 2012).

The Marriage entry model by McGinnis (2003) explained that cohabitation tends to change the perceived costs and benefits of marriage in ways that affect partners' intentions and expectations to marry and ultimately increasing the likelihood of marriage. Also, the Inertia model by Stanley et al., (2006) has argued that instead of affecting the

costs and benefits of marriage, cohabitation, more so than dating, orients partners toward marriage simply by affecting the costs associated with ending the relationship.

The aforementioned models speak to the subject of marital beliefs in the context of cohabitation for African Americans. For certain African American women, cohabitation is considered to be different than that of dating as it produces a shift in marital beliefs towards a favorable perception of marriage. Some researchers argue the reason for such shift has more to do with the values and the symbolic capital more for women than men (Barr, A. et al, 2015). For African American men, cohabitation or dating did not change their perspectives concerning marital beliefs. Having a romantic partner shifted their marital beliefs toward a favorable perception (Barr, A. et al, 2015). In addition to favorable perceptions towards marital beliefs, there are a disproportionate number of African Americans who cohabit due potentially to economic marginalization and low educational achievements. This has been linked to decision-making strategies in deciding who cohabits instead of marry (Chaney & Marsh, 2008; Manning, 2015; Tucker & Taylor, 1989).

Individual Factors

AA communities in the United States have acknowledged the need to form healthy families through marriage (King & Allen, 2009). Part of this process begins with the characteristics sought in a potential partner. Researchers identified distinctive mental and moral qualities sought by African Americans in an ideal mate: one who is reliable, monogamous, affectionate, financially stable, and one who identifies as African American (King & Allen, 2009). Upon further inspection, there are surprising

similarities and also differences between African American men and women in reference to qualities in ideal partners.

One particular study indicated Black men and women searched for marital partners whose incomes surpass their own (King & Allen, 2009). African American women placed emphasis on their partners' financial, educational status, and economic status (King & Allen, 2009). This speaks to the significance of education as central to the access of economic and social resources (Manning, 2015). In addition, this also reflects the significant relation of marriage and money in contemporary America (Schneider, 2015). For African American men, although they looked for marital partners whose incomes surpassed their own, their income was significantly higher than the median income (King & Allen, 2009). As employment status influences relationship entry and satisfaction to a certain extent, it was important for African American men to provide for their families (Marbley, 2003). However, AA women have been expected to be "fathers," protectors, and providers for their families for a long time and consequently this may present issues based on gender roles in intimate relationships (Wallace, 2007).

Additional differences influencing low marital rates in the African American community are perhaps best examined through a developmental perspective. In one study, men chose a partner who held the same values as their mother (Tyson, 2012). In addition, African American men and women take different pathways to intimacy and relationship maturity. Shaped by struggles and complexities in concepts of manhood, the role sex plays in a relationship, and differences in relationship goals, the incompatibility evident at times between African American men and women speaks to gendered differences (King & Allen, 2009; Tyson, 2012). For instance, in a recent study, AA

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women wanted a partner who did not have a high priority on sex (King & Allen, 2009). Compounding upon this, Wallace (2007) identified AA men as socialized to be sexually active with as many women as much as possible. Consequently, such discrepancies form fundamental differences that result in women being left developmentally and emotionally peerless within their chronological age group (Tyson, 2012). This in turn causes AA women to seek men who are older and more mature. Through this they become vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, given the lack of developed interpersonal evaluation skills (Tyson, 2012).

Life Course Developmental Framework

Transitions

Transition is a concept that consist of stage, event, and time (Boss et. Al, 2004). In addition, transitions are always embedded in trajectories that give them distinctive form and meaning (Elder, 1994). Some scholars have defined the concept of 'transition' as a social relocation in roles and statuses representing a distinct departure from previous roles and statuses (Andrew & Ruel, 2010; Black et al., 2009). In the process of change, life transitions can produce opportunities to assume new responsibilities and challenges to age and social-graded tasks, which may result in stress (Benner, 2011). Furthermore, previous childhood and adolescent events effect transitioning into non-marital relationships as beliefs and expectations about marriage emerge during the adolescence stage (Bridges, 2001; Crissey 2005). With the formation of beliefs and expectations, relational schemas are formed, to guide future relationships, influencing the transitional experiences (Baldwin, 1992; Crick & Dodge, 1994).

Life Course Events

Union formation decisions are not made in a vacuum but are embedded within life events (i.g. education, weddings), and social relationships (Guzzo, 2006; Elder 1994). Experiencing multiple types of events simultaneously while forming intimate relationships within a time period informs the relationship outcomes. For instance, the type of intimate relationship formed, cohabitation or marriage, is related to employment particularly for men (Guzzo, 2006). Furthermore, school enrollment discourages intimate relationship formation, while finishing college encourages it (Guzzo 2006; Litcher et. Al., 1992). Intimate relationship unions are often formed around the same time as other life course events and the experiences of the events are often times related to the type of union individuals choose.

Timing of Transitions

Some scholars suggest that the timing of transitions, specifically in adulthood can be characterized as one's capacity to match decisions, commitments, and career transitions with other adult transitions as well as opportunities and constraints (Raikkonen, Kokko, Rantanen, 2011). Other researchers disagree with this current concept of transition and calls for a revision to capture the complex, non-linearity of lives that are always in the process of becoming (Horschelmann, 2011). Sharron Sassler (2010) called for scholars to explore the processes behind relationship formation initial stages of young adults to observe how they transition into the relationships and how they progress romantically.

Links between timing of adult transitions and its antecedents in childhood has

psychological implications across adulthood. Early timing of transitions carry life course consequences scholars deem as cumulative advantages or cumulative disadvantage. The cumulative advantage/disadvantage advance the argument that social institutions and societal structures develop mechanisms that ensure increased advantages for those who succeed early in life and increasing disadvantages for who struggle (Hutchison, 2015). For instance, early motherhood sets a chain of cumulative disadvantages in motion by impeding perhaps her educational goals and career goals (Raikkonen, Kokko, & Rantanen, 2011.

Cumulative disadvantages has also been linked to intergenerational poverty (Hutchison, 2015). Researchers suggest the focus on intergenerational transmission of attitudes and behaviors can serve as an instrument to potentially explicate how childhood family structure relate to fertility patterns subsequently such as views towards sexual activity and childbearing outside of marriage (Axinn & Thornton, 1996; Thornton & Camburn, 1987), and a willingness to consider childbearing patterns apart from marriage when transitioning into non-marital intimate relationships. Furthermore, Glen Elder (1994) indicated disadvantages and opportunities of adult children including personal problems, become intergenerational. A long view of family interconnections help social scientists examine how generations through relationship/marriage patterns, statuses, positions, socioeconomic rewards, and other transmissions influence the transitioning into non-marital intimate relationships.

A primary example of the link being cumulative disadvantage and intergenerational poverty is in the link researchers have argued between family structure and a child's life chances. Researchers have noted children who grow up with an

absentee father will likely have negative outcomes in several areas including: poorer

grades, lower testing scores, less academic potential compared to their counterparts, most

likely to drop out of high school, least likely to enroll in college or finish, more likely to

have higher prevalence of psychological and behavioral changes. A child's life chance

with the absence of a biological father is linked to transitions to adulthood, family

formation, and economic status as young adults. (McLahanan & Percheski, 2008).

In addition, researchers have indicated childbearing patterns are closely linked to

poverty. With African-American women being the second highest group of single-

mothers in the nation (National Vital Statistics, 2012), they are five times as likely to be

poor compared to their married counterparts (Cancian & Reed, 2009). This could

contribute to the perpetuation of inequalities within the African-American community.

However, researchers who study cumulative advantage/disadvantage has also found that

the cumulative processes are reversible under certain conditions especially when human

agency is exercised, resources are mobilized, environmental conditions change

opportunity structures, and when resources are mobilized to create governmental safety

nets for the vulnerable.

Socio-Spatial Context of Transitions

Transitions into non-marital intimate relationships are negotiated in social spaces

(Worth, 2011). Space is considered to be socially constructed, and acts in complex ways

as a medium of the operation of social relations, which shapes peoples experience (Dyck,

1995). Social geographers noted the importance of re-conceptualizing spatial aspects of

transition noting people move around within places that have meaning for them (Skelly et

al., 2002). Fiona Smyth (2005) suggested that specific places develop, and subsequently sustain a reputation for people so it's not the specific geographical location that matters but the social and symbolic organization of space itself.

Life course has become an important issue in geography in recent years (Scheiner, 2014) allowing researchers to explore dynamic interrelationships, played out over space (Dyck, 1995). In addition, focusing on the socio-spatial context provide researchers with a wider scope in situating lives in a wider array of relationships and diverse context, and examine the production and reproduction within one's family at the intersection of socio-spatial and political-economic structures (Monk & Katz, 1993). Furthermore, the significance of socio-spatial context finds footing in role transitions. Roles tend to be bounded in both space and time – they are more relevant in certain physical locations and at certain times of the day and week (Ashforth et. Al., 2000). In respect to this study, the exploration of transitions with the context of the socio-spatial component of relationships, specifically role transitions among young African American couples is critical to the understanding of intimate relationship formation.

Roles

Scholars have highlighted the family unit as the most salient environment for establishing a blueprint of roles (Roberts-Douglass & Curtis-Boles, 2013). Transitions in and out of families characterize the movements across the life course such as the adoption of family roles into the transition of adulthood. Roles are considered social expectations persons in given social positions have regarding their own behavior and the behavior of others (MacMillan & Copher, 2005). Specifically in reference to the family, a role is

defined as the norms of a society attached to the kinship positions of the family (White, Klein, Martin, 2015). For this particular study, the focus will be on role transitions: a psychological and/or physical movement between roles, including disengagement from one role (role exit) and engagement in another role (role entry) (Ashforth et. Al., 2000).

Transitions due to changes in relationship roles can be stressful. African-American men whose immediate future is uncertain may opt for cohabitation over marriage with the perception that economic stability and independence is a requirement before marriage (Cherlin, 2000; Oppenheimer, 1988). Uncertainty and instability are considered important factors in intimate relationship formations and union choices (Guzzo, 2006). After prolonged dating, even newly wedded couples face remarkable uncertainty about their mates needs as well as their own, the aspects of having and raising children as well as other areas of life together (Lyngstad & Jalovaara, 2010; Becker, Landes & Michael, 1977).

While the dimension of uncertainty with married couples is different due to 'enforceable trust' (Cherlin, 2004), uncertainty may have a different effect on the trajectory of couples outside the realm of marital legal protection. Cohabitation relationships, on average, do not last long in the United States and leads to breakup within two years (Cherlin, 2005). Researchers have framed the dimension of uncertainty, in reference to transitioning into intimate relationships as an ambiguous, lacking in awareness process and relatively untended moments in regards to personal rules and assumptions (Soulsby & Bennett, 2015; Vaughan, 1986). Furthermore, studies have shown how uncertainty specifically in relation to male unemployment has had large negative effects on the stability and formation of intimate relationships (McLanahan &

Percheski, 2008). Although African-Americans face financial uncertainties, they are choosing to transition into intimate relationships (Chambers & Kravitz, 2011).

Gender Roles

Gender is also a critical aspect of roles in African American intimate relationship unions. Gender politics in African American couples are considered complex (Cowdery, Scarborough, Knudson-Martin, et. Al, 2009). Differences in expectations and perceptions are a major issue in any relationship, and societal roles have added much confusion and contradiction to the differences for African Americans (Pinderhuges, 2002). Franklin and Pillow (1995) advanced the idea that black male-female relationships are often destructive when the gender roles are not complementary or when there are barriers to actualize the complementary roles. Furthermore, African American men and women ideas reflect neo-patriarchal gender ideas. Women still want provider husbands and fathers and men want wives to be primary nurtures (Dixon, 2009). The expectancy from both men and women to perform traditional gender-specific roles is an important area that influences African American relationships. Black women have been expected to be "fathers," protectors, and providers for their families for a long time and consequently this may present issues based on gender roles in intimate relationships (Wallace, 2007).

Assortative Mating

As previously mentioned in the Introduction, assortative mating is the nonrandom matching of individuals into relationships (Schwartz, 2013) within groups (endogamy) or without groups (exogamy) and between people with similar (homogamy) or dissimilar

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(heterogamy) traits (Schwartz, 2013). Although there are many types of assortative

mating that spans many disciplines, the most common in the literature are socio-

economic status (including education, occupation, income, and class background),

race/ethnicity, and religion. Assortative mating is important because it organizes people

into families; determine characteristic of parents, affects individuals' access to

`resources' and the distribution of resources across families (Schwartz, 2013).

Furthermore, boundaries between social groups are maintained through assortative

mating and weakened through intermarriage (Schwartz, 2013). However, nonrandom

assortative matching patterns for African Americans are more likely to be disrupted by

structural, cultural, and individual factors.

Racial Homogamy in United States Marriages

Spousal homogamy, marriage between a couple with similar demographic

characteristics (i.e. age, education, race/ethnicity), is commonplace. However,

heterogamy, or disparity between spouses on the aforementioned dimensions, is linked to

lower relationship quality and stability (Lamidi et. Al., 2015; Booth & Edwards, 1992).

There has been a generational shift in intraracial marriages or spousal racial homogamy

among African American and White couples over the past fifty years in the United States.

Intraracial coupling remains the dominant marriage pattern in the United States as

the vast majority, 95% of Americans marry within their racial groups. However, that

marriage pattern has been on a decline. In 1964, all African American and White

marriages involved spouses from similar racial backgrounds (Lamidi et. Al., 2015). In

2014, 95% of marriages were racially homogamous. The decline in racially homogamous

relationships since early 1970s cut across all levels of education however it was more pronounced among higher education levels. African American and White couples with less than high school degrees diminished by 3% from 100% in 1964 to 97% in 2010. College educated couples experienced a greater decline, 5% in racial homogamy over the same time period from 99% in 1964 to 94% in 2010. Furthermore, the U.S. is experiencing a decline in racial homogamy across generational lines from the older to the youngest. Among the Greatest generation cohort, all couples are racially homogamous; Silent generation, 99% of their members are racially homogamous; Babyboom generation, 97% are racially homogamous, Generation X, 95%, and the generation born between 1983- 1997, Millennial generation, 94% are intraracially married (Lamidi et. Al., 2015).

Educational Homogamy in United States Marriages

Marriages are considered heterogamous if one spouse attained a higher or lower level of education than the other spouse (Lamidi et. Al., 2015). The share of marriages with the same levels of education slightly declined from 60% in 1964 to 56% in 2014. In 2014, more than half of U.S. marriages were educationally homogamous with 23% more educated wives and 20% more educated husbands. Husbands attained higher levels of education than wives throughout the late 1960s and 70s, peaking in 1979 at 27%. Since 1979, the share of marriages with higher educated husbands dropped nearly 25% to one in five marriages. In contrast, the marriages involving wives with higher levels of education have been increasing since the late 1980s. In 2007, the proportion of marriages with better educated wives had surpassed the marriages with better educated husbands.

By 2014, 23% of marriages involved wives with higher levels of education than their husbands compared to 20% with higher educated husbands (Lamidi et. Al., 2015).

There are racial variations in educational homogamy. For instance, the fifty year decline in educational homogamous marriages among African Americans and White couples have been evident but much more pronounced among African Americans. Since 1964, White educational homogamous marriages declined 4.3% and Black educational homogamous marriages declined 25%. In addition, fifty years ago, 68% of African American marriages compared to 59% of White marriages involved couples with similar levels of education. Since 1997, the share of educationally homogamous marriages among Whites has exceeded the share among African Americans. By 2014, 56% of White marriages were educationally homogamous compared with 52% of Black marriages (Lamidi et. Al., 2015). Furthermore, the five decades of increased educational hetermogamy in Black marriages reflect a 63% increase in the share of Black marriages with more educated wives compared to 40% increase in the share of Black marriages with more educated husbands. Black women are more likely to be in a marriage where they have the educational advantage over their husbands compared to White women. Conservely, White men are more likely than African American men to have an educational advantage within their marriages (Lamidi et. Al., 2015).

Assortative mating patterns, while applied to the marital relationship equally speaks to non-marital relationships in respect to marriage squeeze in the African American community (Dixon, 2009). Many African American women of all ages are squeezed out of the marriage market even as racial homogamous marriage rates continue to decline. Racial homogamy in intermarriage is greater among African American

females than males (Bratter & King, 2008). Further more, the increase in economic

independence, urbanization, the expansion of higher education, and decline in

homogamous marriage rates have negatively influenced marriage prospects for African

American women (Crowder & Tonlay, 2000). The aforementioned has implications for

how couples transition into non-marital relationships and whether they cohabit or marry.

Object Relations Theory

Since Object relations theory is critical to the understanding of young African

Americans constructing intimate relationships. Although the complex issues concerning

the gap between relationship outcome of marriage and relationship practices are replete

with historical and cultural significance, there is also developmental and psychodynamic

aspect to the issue. Object relations theory is similar to attachment theory in reference to

the concept of the internal working model, but distinctly different as attachment theory's

emphasis is on real experiences and for object relations the emphasis is based on the

effect of the internal world of fantasy on real experiences (Priel & Besser, 2001). Object

relations theory addresses how individuals develop in their respective relationships with

their parents and how such relationships continue to influence interpersonal expectancies,

behaviors, and feelings throughout life (Handelzalts et al., 2014; Calabrese, Farber &

Western, 2005).

Concept of Representation

The concept of mental representation develops over the life cycle and consists of

conscious, unconscious cognitive, affective, and experiential components (Blatt, 2004).

In addition, mental representations are considered by scholars to be templates or

prototypes that organize how one thinks and feels about oneself and others. Consequently, they provide the basis for social interaction and interpersonal behavior (Blatt, 2004; Anderson, 1983; Auerbach, 1993; Horowitz, 1988; Madler, 1988; Markus, 1977; Nelson & Grundel, 1987; Westen, 1991b). In other words, Object relations theory describes the internal mental representations of relationships between self and other, which manifest themselves in behaviors with others (Applegate, 1990; Lieberman, 1984). The concept of representation is generally defined as internal images, ideas, fantasies, memories and feelings with invested strong emotional energy about a persons, places, or things that forms repeated patterns of viewing and relating in possibly inaccurate or distorted patterns (Frankland, 2013; Hamilton, 1990).

Types of Mental Representations

There are two types of internal representations: object representation and self representation (St. Clair, 2004 p.6). These representations take shape during sequences of interactive "moments" between the infant and primary caregiver that become generalized into enduring configurations (Applegate, 1990; Pine, 1985, p.62). The concepts of Object relations are not literal behaviors of people but they help highlight internal boundaries between interacting representations of self and other (Applegate, 1990).

Developmentally, Object relation theories have advanced the idea that object representations begin as vague diffused and sensorimotor experiences of pleasure and perhaps pain. Blatt (2004) proposed with development, object representations become increasingly differentiated, integrated, stable and accurate proceeding from amorphous global representations to highly articulated and integrated functions with properties.

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Object relations theory posits that representations emerge initially from mother-child relationship in the repeated experiences of frustration and gratification with a consistent and need gratifying object. Later stages of representation emerge out of differentiated parent-child interactions. The nature of the object relations determines the level of representations, and the establishment of more differentiated and stable representations provides a new organization for interpersonal experience (Blatt, 2004). In summary, the first level of representation is sensorimotor representation followed by perceptual objection representation, iconic object representation, and the most advanced level is conceptual/symbolic representation (Blatt, 2004).

Object Representation and the African American Family

As previously mentioned, there is a dearth of research on Object relations, in particular mental/object representation with the African American population. One study, in particular, compared mental representation of 25 African American women with Panic Disorder with 25 African American women without Panic Disorder (Porcerelli et. Al., 2010). Another study was conducted to examine the link between object representation and psychopathology, stress, physical health status, and alcohol abuse in 110 African American women (Porcerelli et. Al., 2006). Lastly, one dissertation examined disordered eating behaviors with 98 African American women at a Historically Black University using an Object relations perspective (Spadafore, 2007). The lack of studies on mental representation from an Object relations perspective warrants further scholarly investigation in that area of study.

Some social scientists have warned of attempting to illuminate the mental representations of human experience as transcendent over cultural variations (Applegate, 1989, Bowles, 1988, et al). In addition, the aforementioned authors pointed out the dangers of reifying such concepts related to Object relations or Psychoanalysis and applying them concretely to people whose cultural and value orientations differ from white, Western, middle class. (Applegate, 1989, Bowles, 1988, et al) Furthermore, Object relations concepts have been based primarily on a dyadic, matrifocal model of the infant-caregiver relationship which minimizes the place of fathers, siblings, grandparents, and others in the child's object world (Applegate, 1990).

Many African American families go beyond blood relations to include long-standing friends as family (Applegate 1990; Stack, 1975). The significance of variations in family definitions speaks to the fact that the availability and ready interchanging aspect of multiple primary caregivers leads to the development of mental representations of caregiving functions that are more diffuse than those of Euro-American infants (Applegate 1990). Family scholars have noted two traits found in African American marriage and family patterns potentially from West African cultural traits that influence caregiver patterns: the preeminence of bloodline ties over the conjugal or marital tie and the importance that extended family play in the family structure and functioning. Consequently, marriage may not assume the same importance that it does when families are based around the marriage unit (Dixon, 2009; Nobles, 1974; Sudarkasa, 2007).

Scholars have also noted other strengths pertinent to the African American family, which may influence the development of object representation related to intimate relationships. The strengths are as follows: flexibility in family roles with strong

intergenerational bonds (McCullough-Chavis & Waites, 2008; Hill, 1997), emphasis on extended kinship network where family members and fictive kin are linked in terms of obligation and support (McCullough-Chavis & Waites, 2008; Hill, 1997), caregiving with special care for children and elders (McCullough-Chavis & Waites, 2008; Billingsley, 1992; Surdarkasa, 1997), reciprocity, a sense of interdependence, feelings of "oneness" and family solidarity (McCullough-Chavis & Waites, 2008; Hall & King 1982; Pinderhughes, 1982), and the fundamental nature of spirituality and prominent role of religion (McCullough-Chavis & Waites, 2008; Billingsley, 1992. 1999; Boyd-Franklin, 1989; Dunn & Dawes, 1999; Hill, 1997).

Object Representation and Intimate Relationships

Object relation theorists have advanced the idea that the content, structure, and quality of representations of self, other, and relationships may have some level of associations with behaviors in intimate relationships (Handelzalts et al., 2014; Western, 1991). Scholars have noted that the first steps in love are learned in early childhood through the process of communication between the child and child's emotionally significant objects (Milvojevic & Ivezic, 2004). In addition, unresolved developmental problems emerge in love relationships because early important figures are present/live in the unconscious (Milvojevic & Ivezic, 2004). Along these lines, individuals tend to retain the early concept of a relationship with an idealized love object, and therefore need to realize such a relationship during the adult years. The concept of idealized object may be linked with the first love object (the mother satisfying the needs of the child for food, love, and understanding) or a desired object that does not actually exist in reality. Object

relation scholars have asserted the process of falling in love consist of the mutual projection of idealized objects and aggressive parts are either repressed or projected onto the world to produces feelings of happiness and satisfaction (Milvojevic & Ivezic, 2004) Yet in reference to idealized objects or images, one writer noted, images are based on memories, influenced by circumstances and culture, images can be at odds, and can be denied (Galinsky, 1987). Individuals who did not successfully pass through the stages of development during which the capacity for love was acquired, there may be inadequate reaction for a partner's love (Milvojevic & Ivezic, 2004). Furthermore, when individuals become of age, they retain the idea of a relationship with an idealized loved object, which creates a need for the concrete realization of relationship. Two critical components present in all intimate relationships are fusion/symbiosis and separation. The fusion or symbiosis stands for experiencing the undifferentiated oneness with the significant other due to permeability of boundaries. As a result, this allows for feelings of empathy, attachment, closeness, and mutual fantasies. Separation within a relationship serves the purpose of experiencing real aspects of self and object other (Milvojevic & Ivezic, 2004).

Yet, few studies have explored the relationship between Object relation theories and interpersonal/or intimate relationships (Handelzalts et al., 2014). Furthermore, an EBSCOhost search on Object relations and African Americans yields little to no results. Intimate relationship patterns of inequalities and differences concerning head of household in the African American community potentially speaks to object representation of early primary relationships and extended family networks.

Symbolic Interaction Theory

A search in EBSCOHOST search engine on symbolic interactionism, or symbolic interaction theory and African Americans/Blacks yields little results. The symbolic interaction theory, as previously mentioned, emphasizes the dynamics of social interaction present between individuals and their social worlds (Rosenbaum, 2009; Blumer, 1969). Moreover, symbolic interactionism researchers orients towards researching how people create meaning during social interactions, how they present and construct the self and how they define situations of co-presence with others (Rosenbaum, 2009). One of the central tenets of symbolic interactionism is that people act in particular manners because how they define situations (Rosenbaum, 2009; Boss et. Al., 2004; Charon, 2010; White, Klein, Martin, 2015). Although this perspective is important to the understanding of the disconnect between marriage attitudes and the reality of marriage in the African American community, little research has been conducted from such perspective.

One study, in particular, was recently published, coupling processes and experiences of never married heterosexual black men and women: a phenomenological study, addresses the disconnect between marriage ideals and reality in African American relationships (Awosan & Hardy, 2016). This phenomenological study provides a model for how certain African Americans experience and maintain relationships (Awosan & Hardy, 2016). Another study on Black lesbian couples (Glass & Few-Demo, 2013), highlights the plight of Black lesbian couples in striving for long-term intimacy. Yet, there remains a dearth of studies for a thorough comprehension of the challenges with the desire for marriage among African American couples.

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Summary

This section located this study within the academic discourse around intimate relationship formation as it relates to the African American community, specifically African American couples. The review of literature first addressed the existing theoretical frameworks, and the salient factors affect coupling patterns within the African American community. Structural factors speak to cross-institutional normative sequencing that may compete with other family sequencing. Cultural factors provided context for the social values that has informed coupling dynamics between couples and individual factors has given voice to the gender socialization that may create developmental and emotional 'off-timing' between African American men and women in intimate relationships. Secondly, the review addressed the significance of transitions. Thirdly, the concept of roles transition was highlighted to provide context to potential constraints in which young couples transition and make decisions influencing the trajectory of their relationships. Fourth, the review addressed assortative mating the effect of marriage squeeze specific to African American women. Moreover, an in-depth discussion to Object relations theory provided an introduction to need to focus on internal content in context of intimate relationships in among African American couples. Furthermore, an in-depth discussion located the significance of object representation overall and a lack of representation in the Black community and among couples. Lastly, this section called attention to symbolic interactionism and the lack of studies from this particular framework as it applies to relationship formation with African American couples.

CHAPTER FOUR

METHODOLOGY

Overview

The research goals of this study were guided by the four research questions: (a) What kind of relationship did participants have with early key figures/parents (b) how did these (family backgrounds) influence participants as they enter intimate relationships? (c) do couples match on these patterns, and if not, what happens? (d) as couple's seek to create their own relationship pathways and shared meanings, what is the character of couple's interactive process as they strive towards long-term intimacy? In order to operationalize the research goals, this study employed the best fitting methodological choice: a Grounded Theory Approach.

A grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) was used for data collection and analysis in order to operationalize the four research questions. Theoretical and convenient sampling strategies were used to recruit 16 young African American couples (32 individuals), in both non-marital and marital relationships between the ages of 22-40 primarily residing in southern California. Couples interviews were conducted via audiotape and subsequently transcribed. Moreover, the researcher made attempts to recruit Marriage and family therapists or African American pastors who have counseled young African American couples. The researcher interviewed a few newly married couples. The rigor of this research study was evaluated by its credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Research Methodology

EPISTEMOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS	Objectivism	Social Constructionism	Subjectivism
ONTOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS	Positivist/Postpositvist/Realism	Social Constructionist/Interpretive	Postmodernist
TYPES OF GROUNDED THEORIES	Objectivist Grounded Theory [Glaser]	Constructivist Grounded Theory [Charmaz]	Postmodern Grounded Theory [Clarke]
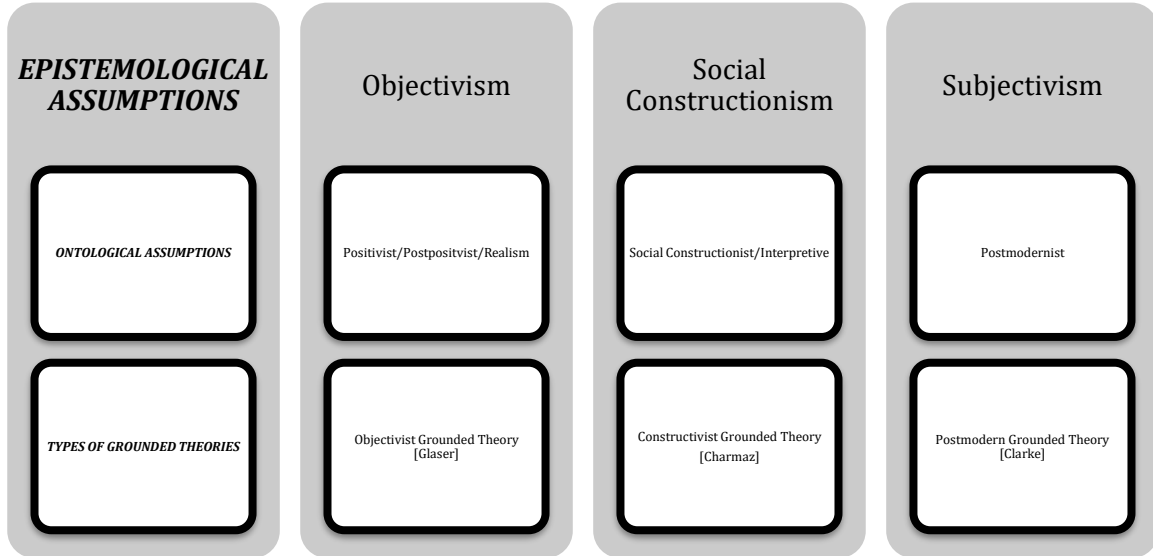
Figure 5. Epistemological, Ontological Assumptions and Types of Grounded Theories

Epistemological Assumptions

For this study, the researcher synthesized ontological realism with epistemological constructivism/interpretation. The nature of the research questions called for an epistemic position that discovers the processes by which people, particularly young African Americans describe, explain, and account for the world they live in (Gergen, 1985). While descriptive studies have been published on intimate relationship formation trends (Pew Research Center Report, 2015), young educated African Americans have been absent in the literature from a life course developmental framework, object relations theory, and social interactionism perspective. Social constructivism epistemic positioning provided the most qualified methodology to challenge the objective basis of conventional knowledge concerning non-marital relationship formation, but also the right framework to explore the dynamics of new knowledge from an emic perspective (Angrosino, 2007).

Constructivists are considered relativists along the epistemological spectrum and believe the structure and content of reality is understandable by many social and experiential constructs. Constructions are not necessarily true and are alterable as well as there "realities." The constructivists research approach is hermeneutical and dialectical in nature. The constructivists espoused values influence the researcher-respondent relationship with the belief that the social construction of the individual is refined only through interactions. Finally, one of the constructivists aims is to distill a consensus construction that is more informed then previous constructions (Creswell, 2014; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). APA on citations.

Ontological Assumptions

The ontological positioning which aligned most with the research goals was, critical realism. Critical realism posited there is a real world that exists independently of our perceptions, theories, and constructions while accepting a form of epistemological constructionism and relativism (our understanding of this world is inevitably a construction from our own perspectives and standpoint). Even though critical realism rejects the idea of "multiple realities," in the sense of independent and incommensurable worlds that are socially constructed by different individuals and societies, it is quite compatible with the idea that there are different valid perspectives on reality (Maxwell, 2012). Critical realism is different in premise and implications from the perspective of positivism. Positivists have argued the argument of theoretical instrumentalism: theoretical terms and concepts are logical constructions based on observational data useful in making predictions but which has not claim to any "reality" (Maxwell, 2012).

However, critical realists reject this assumption. On the contrary, Critical realists posit that mental states and attributes (including meaning and intentions), while not directly observable, are part of the real world, a position denied by both logical positivism and constructivism. Furthermore, the concept of "process" is central to explanation and are seen as real phenomena rather than abstract models.

Types of Grounded Theory

Grounded theory seeks to construct theory about issues salient to what people consider to be matters of importance to their lives. There are different types of Grounded theories disposal to researchers for the construction of theory. Clarke (2003) asserted that, grounded theories have evolved from its objectivistic inception, given that 'Classic' grounded theory originating with Glaser and Strauss had more of a post-positivistic orientation. The objectivist orientation of Grounded theory has the following characteristics: assumption of a reality that can be researched, understood, and represented through theoretical explanation, treatment of data as if they had an objective status, use of systematic procedures for the collection and analysis of data, concern with researcher bias and strategies to control this bias, a direct and mechanical link between observation and theory, rendering the researcher somewhat invisible, and there is a tendency to report data and research findings as distanced experts (Daly, 2007).

Kathy Charmaz, along with other scholars have differing perspectives to the praxis of Grounded theory. The scholars subscribe to a social constructionist view of Grounded theory. The constructionist orientation of Grounded Theory has the following characteristics: data are co-constructed between the researcher and the researched, there

is not one reality to be understood and represented, but many perspectives on the same reality that emerge in the interactive research process, emphasis is on strategies rather than rule-oriented methods, researcher gains intimate familiarity through involvement, understanding, participation, recognition that theoretical products reflect complex changeable meanings, deliberate inclusion of the researcher's self in research reports and theoretical constructions, and reflexivity is apparent in the written texts in order to illustrate the researcher's meaning-making process (Daly, 2007).

Adele Clarke along with other scholars has more of a postmodern orientation to Grounded theory: Situational analyses. Situational analyses have a different conceptual schema or guiding metaphor than the traditional Grounded theory offering three main approaches: situational mapping, social worlds/arenas maps, and positional maps. The goal for this type of Grounded theory is to: disarticulate Grounded theory from its remaining positivist roots while enhancing its muted postmodern capacities, supplement the traditional grounded theory root metaphor with an ecological root metaphor as an alternative conceptual infrastructure, generating sensitizing concepts and theoretical integration toward provocative yet provisional grounded theorizing rather than the development of substantive and formal theories as the ultimate goals, and framing systematic and flexible means of research design that facilitate multisite research, including discursive textual, visual, and archival historical materials and documents, as well as ethnographic (interview and observational) transcripts and field notes to more full take into account the sea of discourses in which we are continually awash in the postmodern era (Clarke, 2003).

In consideration of my epistemic positioning, intellectual, practical, and personal

goals, the most salient type of grounded theory that allowed for the best answer the

research questions is the Charmaz social constructionist grounded theory approach

(Charmaz, 2014). The aim of this particular research project was to discover certain

factors from parent-child relationships and their respective influences on non-marital

intimate relationship formation. The research approach was broad, process-oriented focus

that occured mostly in a natural setting in which the researcher and other potential

researchers on the research team became familiar with the data.

Participants

In this study, we employed theoretical and convenience sampling strategies to

recruit our primarily African American participants. As can be seen in Table 1, we

recruited 16 couples (32 individuals) to participate in a dyadic interview about committed

relationships. Of the 16 couples, 9 were dating/courting, 2 were engaged, 2 cohabiting, 3

were married. All 16 participants identified themselves as Christian with regard to

religious preference. Of the 32 participants, 12.5% of participants earned some college

credit but no degree, 3.12% earned an Associate's degree, 3.12% earned a Vocational

training degree, 53% of participants earned a Bachelor's degree, 18.75% Master's degree,

3.12 % Professional degree, 6.25% a doctoral degree. 10 couples, 62.5% had the same

level of educational degrees while with 6 couples, women had higher educational

degrees. 6 participants (28%) were currently in the process of matriculating through

school.

Participants were from a wide range of income categories, with annual incomes

ranging from no-income (student) to > $60,000.00. Participants annual salary ranged

from $30k- $60k. The participants had a diverse occupational background as 75% of

participants were currently employed. Participants reported coming from homes where

their parents were married (41%), single mother-not partnered (16%), divorced (16%),

blended families (9%), homes headed primarily by grandparents (9%), and multiple home

configurations during their formative years (9%). The length of relationships of the

couples interviewed ranged from 3 months to 7 years with a median length of time: 1

year and 11 ½ months.

Table 7. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Gender	Men: 16	Women: 16	N= 32	
Age Range	22-38	22-36		
Religion	Men	Women	Number	Percent
Christian Seventh- day Adventist	9	11	20	62.5%
Christian	3	2	5	15.6%
Christian Baptist	1	0	1	3.12%
Non-denominational	1	3	4	12.5%
Theist	1	0	1	3.12%
Seventh-day Adventist Agnostic	1	0	1	3.12%
Education				
Some College credit; no degree	3	1	4	12.5%
Associate's degree	0	1	1	3.12%
Vocational training	1	0	1	3.12%
Bachelor's degree	10	7	17	53%
Master's degree	2	4	6	18.75%
Professional degree	0	1 (J.D)	1	3.12%
Doctoral degree	0	2	2	6.25%
Currently in School		6		
	3 *2 Medical students *1 PhD student	*2 PhD students *2 Master's students *1 Dental school student *1 completing B.A.	9	28%

Total Income range:	No-income	>$60,000		
Employment Status: Employed	13	11	24	75%
Childhood Family Structure				
Parents were married	5	8	13	41%
Single mother-not partnered homes	5	0	5	16%
Divorced homes	2	3	5	16%
Blended families	2	1	3	9%
Homes headed by Grandparents	2	1	3	9%
Multiple home configurations	0	3	3	9%
Length of Relationships	3 months	7 years	Median: 1 year-11 ½ months	

Procedures

Participants for the present study were included if they met the following criteria: (a) Adults ages 22-40 years old, (b) at least one person within the relationship had to identify as African American, (c) had to be "in a committed relationship" with a member of the opposite sex for a minimum of 3 month; and spoke English. Potential participants were excluded if: (a) previously married, (b) individuals had a history of abuse, and (c) individuals had a current mental health condition preventing informed consent or normal interview exchanges.

Potential study participants were initially recruited via emails sent to a number of professional organizations in southern California: the California Association of Marriage and Family therapists and a number of therapists in private practice working with young African American couples. Emails were also sent to community institutions and gatekeepers: the California chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and local area African American churches. Incentives for each participant included a $5 gift card.

Informed Consent Process

Upon referral and first contact with potential research participants, members of the research team explained the purpose of the study and provided an opportunity for participants to ask questions. If interested, an interview date, time, and location was arranged. in a setting of the participants' choice where privacy could be maintained. Demographic data (age in years, sex, length of relationship, seriousness of relationship, type of relationship, contact frequency, future of relationship, satisfaction with

relationship on a Likert scale from 1-10, level of education, occupation, yearly income, children, involvement in religion, religious affiliation, and family background) was obtained in written form to the participant prior to the interview (5 minutes maximum). The qualitative interviews lasted 45 to 90 minutes. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. The PI and student researcher verified transcribed interviews by listening to the recordings while reviewing the transcript word by word. During this process, all personal identifiers were removed and a couples'/interview code were assigned to protect confidentiality.

Data Collection

Aligned with Grounded Theory principles by Charmaz (2014), all interviews were conducted using a semi-structured preliminary interview guide. The interviews open-ended questions regarding the history of their relationship, recollections of their relationship with their parental figures during their formative years, couples responses to perceived challenges, and their concept of commitment. Data collection continued until saturation of major concepts and categories were achieved. In addition to the interview data, all project team members (PI, student researcher) maintained theoretical memos to augment the development of the theoretical scheme as we reviewed recorded and transcribed interviews.

Researcher Ethics

In addition to providing participants with an inform consent, the researcher abode by the researcher's ethics detailed by the Belmont report. The three ethical principles that

guided the researcher's interaction with research participants were: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. The 'respect for persons' principle was applied by the researcher's understanding that all participants will be treated as autonomous in their thinking and behavior. The beneficence principle was applied with the researcher having the best interests of participants in mind. Lastly, the principle of justice was applied as the researchers understanding of distribution of burdens and benefits of research.

Data Analysis

Data analyses were also guided by Charmaz' grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014). All transcripts were coded with these frameworks in mind as well as for possible emerging themes using a three-step analysis (Creswell, 1998) to ensure that the content of participant interviews is deciphered with as little interference from preconceptions as possible. To be aware of and attempt to set aside preconceptions, all coders explored attitudes, biases, fears, and areas of not knowing that predispose my thinking about young African Americans navigating non-marital relationships. In step two, general themes within and between participants were identified, using an unstructured method called open coding. In step three, open codes were grouped together under higher order axial or category codes which were explored for differences or similarities. Throughout, two main criteria were used to evaluate the accuracy of an emerging theory: (a) Does it fit the situation? and (b) does it work (i.e., does it help the person make sense of his or her relationship patterns)? (Glaser,1992).

Researcher's Assumptions and Biases

There are two important threats to the validity of qualitative conclusions: (1) the selection of data that fit the researcher's existing theory, goals, or preconceptions, and (2) the selection of data that "stand out" to the researcher (Maxwell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Both of the aforementioned threats involve the subjectivity or researcher bias. Given the importance of making known the initial assumptions that are present, the researcher of this study comes with certain biases and assumptions about the African American population. Although my family comes from Haiti, and my ties to my family remains strong, I was raised in the southern part of the United States, specifically Atlanta, GA, a city considered important and symbolic to African Americans. This researcher matriculated in schools predominantly of African American from elementary school until college. After graduate school, this researcher lived, worked, played, dated, churched, and resided in one of the most concentrated African American urban centers in the United States.

In connection with both cultures, or as a 'third culture kid' socialized by both my Haitian culture and to a certain degree the African American culture, this research has attempted to understand and reconcile the meanings from both cultures that have implications for this research study. One assumption that this researcher holds is that relationship formation in the African American community is more informed by a number of factors that are not always compatible: religiosity, the American value of independence, oppression and inequality etc. However, this researcher doesn't fully understand all the factors involved or to what extent, if at all, does family of origin plays

a role relationship formation. To what extent does social policies inform relationship formation.

Trustworthiness: Reducing Threat of Validity from Researcher's Bias

Criteria for Evaluation: Quantitative Research	Criteria for Evaluation: Qualitative Research
Internal Validity	Credibility
External Validity	Transferability
Reliability	Dependability
Objectivity	Confirmability

Figure 6. Criteria for Evaluation Equivalence Table

Credibility

Credibility is involved with establishing the confidence in the results of this study as credible from the perspective of the participants. Given the purpose of qualitative research, understanding a phenomenon of interest from the participants perspective, the participants are the only ones who can legitimately judge the credibility of the results. There are a number of techniques the researcher of this study can use to establish credibility: prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, referential adequacy, and member-checking. For this particular study, the researcher triangulated the data and did a member checking with the research participants.

Triangulation

Triangulation involves using multiple data sources in an investigation to produce understanding. The researcher spoke to individuals in the counseling profession (i.e., social workers, marriage and family therapists, pastors etc.) who have worked extensively with African American couples to provide additional sources of understanding. The researcher also spoke with experts in the field associated with a thorough understanding of the kinds of transitions influencing the profession of relationships.

Member – Checking

Member checking allows for the testing of data, analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions are tested with members of the groups whom the data was originally obtained from. Member checking provides opportunities to assess what the participants intended, correct errors or wrong interpretations, summarize preliminary finds, and confirm particular aspects of the data. The researcher did member checking with some of the couples that were interviewed.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the degree that that the results of this study can be generalized or transferred to other contexts of settings. The researcher is primarily responsible to transferring the results and the transfers from one context to the next context or setting can be enhanced through: thick description. Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted thick description is a way of achieving a type of external validity. Thick description refers to the detailed account of field experiences in which the researcher

makes explicit the patterns of cultural and social relationships and put them into context (Holloway, 1997).

Dependability

Dependability refers to the need for the researcher to account for the ever-changing context within which research occurs. The research is responsible for describing the changes that occur in the setting and how these changes affect the way the research approached the study. An important technique that was used to enhance the dependability of the study was: external audit. External audits involved having an experienced researcher not involved in the research process examine both the process and product of the research study. The purpose was to evaluate the accuracy and evaluate whether or not the findings, interpretations and conclusions are supported by the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the degree to which the results could be confirmed or corroborated by others. There are a number of strategies for enhancing confirmability: confirmability audit, audit trail, triangulation, and reflexivity. The researcher for this study used triangulation and reflexivity. As triangulation was previously described, the researcher will address reflexivity. Reflexivity is considered and attitude of attending systematically to the context of knowledge construction, especially to the effect of the researcher, every step of the research process (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The researcher

wrote memos in a reflexive journal and report research perspectives, positions, values, and beliefs in this particular study.

Implications

This research study was able to provide results that speak to potential barriers and opportunities in navigating non-marital and marital relationships for African American couples. In addition, this study was able to provide important information in reference to how primary relationships influence current relationship functioning if there is no sense of awareness for African Americans. Furthermore, the focus on communication, negotiation, and creatively responding to important relationship areas highlights underlying processes that may benefit the quality of intimate relationships. Lastly, addressing the important areas of role expectations, transitions, and intimacy speak to critical areas that can determine the relationship outcomes. A long term goal from the outcome of this study is to create a couple's mentoring and coaching program that helps individuals bring about personal awareness and self-understanding in breaking destructive relationship patterns and how appreciation how relationship patterns in family history matters for healthy functional intimate relationships. The second objective of this couple's mentoring and coaching Program would be to link young couples with mature couple's for the purpose of mentorship through barriers of relationship challenges. The third objective for this type of coaching program would be to build community as an underpinning support for young African American couples

Limitations

The generated theory was not be able to provide information for any single African Americans, those that are remarried, widowed, or divorced and also below the age of 22 and above the age of 40. In addition, this study was not able to provide any information about other racial and ethnic groups in the United States concerning intimate relationships. The lack of diversity outside of the African American population presents limitations as a result of the inclusion and exclusion criteria of this study. Furthermore, this study was not be able to provide information beyond the important areas of family dynamics, gendered patterns of relating through role transitions, and interpersonal functioning neither will it be able to address issues related to structural, and cultural factors.

Summary

To summarize this chapter, the researcher discussed important methodological decisions critical to the process of selecting the best fitting methodology. This chapter commenced with first an overview of the Qualitative method and provided reasons why it was the best fitting research orientation for this model. Second, this chapter provided a nuanced detail into the different epistemological considerations and issues present while choosing the most appropriate research method. The chapter continued with a discussion on qualitative methodology, the method of choice: Grounded theory and the different types of Grounded theory. An application was provided and the chapter transitioned into research questions, information in regards to the participants, data collection, data analysis, implications, and the limitations of the study.

CHAPTER FIVE

AFRICAN AMERICANS NAVIGATING THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS

TOWARDS MARRIAGE

By

Moosgar Borieux, Jackie Williams-Reade, Susanne Montgomery,

Winetta Oloo, Curtis Fox

Abstract

Scholars have become alarmed as a clear gap between young adult African American attitudes about marriage and the data that finds them to be the least married group of all groups in the US. Although this clear gap has generated much scholarly conversation, few studies have explored the process of transitioning from singlehood into relationships and the meanings created through social interactions among young adult African Americans. Assisted by symbolic interactionism, this grounded research study explored the potential role of how early key figure-participant interactions have in influencing current interactions of 16 young adult African American couples. The findings indicated four emergent patterns of family background influences. As couples dated from different family backgrounds, they responded by going through a three-stage process. Four patterns of responses emerged from the couples' divergent approaches to the three-stage process of reconfiguration. Study implications highlighted the agency of couples in attempts to connect their attitudes towards marriage with the reality of marriage. In particular, clinical implications underscored the need to focus on barriers and opportunities in aiding couples toward their long-term relationship goals. Recommendations for future research are discussed.

Introduction

Scholars have noted African Americans value marriage immensely (Barr, A. et al, 2015), and that most acknowledge the need to form healthy families through marriage (King & Allen, 2009). Indeed, a higher share of African Americans compared to other racial groups in the United States hold the view that it is important for a couple to marry if they plan to spend the rest of their lives together (Wang & Parker, 2014). However, research shows that the numbers of African Americans ages 25 and over who have never been married have quadrupled over the past 50 years: from 9% in 1960 to 36% in 2012, compared to their White counterparts whose percentage have doubled from 8% to 16% (Wang & Parker, 2014). Moreover, research has shown that African Americans are considered the least likely to marry and when they marry, they do so later, with their marriages more likely to be disrupted by separation or divorce, thus spending less time married compared to any other racial group in the United States (Perry, 2013; Dixon, 2009; Cherlin 1998).

Background

To better understand this disconnect between marital attitudes and the elusive reality of being and staying married, researchers have attempted to investigate this issue using a number of frameworks, including issue of race, gender, and class based on an interlocking system of discrimination and racism (Johnson & Loscocco, 2015; Weber, 1998). Many argue that the cumulative disadvantage from the institution of slavery (Patterson, 1998; Pinderhughes, 2002; Pinsoff; 2002) and subsequent disruption of intact families by social policies provide the historical context and are indeed contributing

factors (Cherlin, 2005). Other theories and used to explain the low marital rates in the African American community include the imbalanced sex ratio theory (Warner et. Al., 2011; South, 1992) which argues that the ratio of males to females in a particular geographic area is associated with the likelihood of marriage, risk of divorce, and rates of non-marital child-bearing. Aligned with this approach, many have argued that the sheer numbers of eligible AA men and the subsequent imbalance leads to less optimal matches, that are less likely to succeed (Warner et. Al, 2011; Guttentag and Secord, 1983). Others have used the mating gradient theory. The mating gradient theory states that potential husbands are expected to be superior to their wives in education, income and career achievement (Dixon, 2009) and that the imbalance of higher education in AA females leads to fewer successful AA couples. Similarly, the parental investment model states that males seek young, healthy, and nurturing female partners and females seek males who have resources or characteristics (e.g. intelligence, education, ambition) needed to obtain resources so that they are able to maximize their parental capacities for the survival of their offspring (Dixon, 2009).

Scholars have also tested a few hypotheses to make empirical inferences concerning the amount of time African Americans spend outside of marriage. The economic-provider hypothesis (Dixon, 2009; Koball, 1998) has been used mostly to explain the trend toward later marriage for African American men. Economic–provider hypothesis states that because men have traditionally been primary economic providers in marriage (and this is not necessarily true for AA men), AA men are more likely to marry when they have full time employment. Considerable evidence supports this hypothesis. In addition, the adult-transition hypothesis has also been used to make inferences (Dixon,

2009; Koball, 1998). The adult-transition hypothesis states that marriage enables individuals to attain adult status. However, there are events that interfere with first age of marriage for men. The two events that delay adult roles are: school enrollment and military service. Many also argue that incarceration is an additional time interfering with first age of marriage in the context of AAs. Moreover, the Benefits-of-Early-Marriage hypothesis (Dixon, 2009; Koball, 1998) states that young men delay marriage when the benefits of marriage decrease. Two twentieth century trends are hypothesized to have reduced the benefits of early marriage for men through reducing the benefits of large families: education (Vogl, 2015; Koball, 1998; Caldwell, 1980) and southern residence (Bloome & Muller, 2015; Koball, 1998; Landale and Tolnay, 1991). While these approaches to understanding the issue of less and less AA marrying hold true in part, Charon (2010) argues that these explanatory frameworks do not account for African Americans as social persons in constant lifelong social interactions, as thinking beings (interaction from within), as individuals who define the situation they are in (from ongoing social interaction and thinking), as individuals whose actions tend to result from what is occurring in their present situation, and active beings in relation to their environment.

Statement of the Problem

There is a clear gap between AA's attitudes about marriage and the data that find them to be the least married group of all groups in the US. However, a review of the literature indicates there is a dearth of studies that focus on African American in the context of relationships, specifically the process of transiting from singlehood into

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relationships and the meanings created through social interactions. Moreover, much of

what is known about African Americans coupling patterns come from a number of the

other perspectives previously mentioned. Using Symbolic Interactionism perspective

(Charon, 2010; White, Klein, & Martin, 2015) we wish to explore the potential role of

early key figure-child social interactions have in influencing young adult African

Americans interactions with their significant others.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of our study is to explore if and how earlier relationships affect

subsequent intimate relationships (Raley et al., 2007; Sassler, 2010). Specifically, four

questions guided this research: (a) What kind of relationship did participants have with

early key figures/parents and how did these influence participants as they enter intimate

relationships? (b) do couples match on these patterns, and if not, what happens? And (c)

As couple's seek to create their own relationship pathways and shared meanings, what is

the character of couple's interactive process as they strive towards long-term intimacy?

Methods

Participants/Sample

In this study, we employed theoretical and convenience sampling strategies to

recruit our primarily African American participants. As can be seen in Table 1, we

recruited 16 couples (32 individuals) to participate in a dyadic interview about committed

relationships. Of the 16 couples, 9 were dating/courting, 2 were engaged, 2 cohabiting, 3

were married. All 16 participants identified themselves as Christian with regard to

religious preference. Of the 32 participants, 12.5% of participants earned some college credit but no degree, 3.12% earned an Associate's degree, 3.12% earned a Vocational training degree, 53% of participants earned a Bachelor's degree, 18.75% Master's degree, 3.12 % Professional degree, 6.25% a doctoral degree. 10 couples, 62.5% had the same level of educational degrees while with 6 couples, women had higher educational degrees. 6 participants (28%) were currently in the process of matriculating through school.

Participants were from a wide range of income categories, with annual incomes ranging from no-income (student) to > $60,000.00. Participants annual salary ranged from $30k- $60k. The participants had a diverse occupational background as 75% of participants were currently employed. Participants reported coming from homes where their parents were married (41%), single mother-not partnered (16%), divorced (16%), blended families (9%), homes headed primarily by grandparents (9%), and multiple home configurations during their formative years (9%). The length of relationships of the couples interviewed ranged from 3 months to 7 years with a median length of time: 1 year and 11 ½ months.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Gender	Men: 16	Women: 16	N= 32	
Age Range	22-38	22-36		
Religion	Men	Women	Number	Percent
Christian Seventh- day Adventist	9	11	20	62.5%
Christian	3	2	5	15.6%
Christian Baptist	1	0	1	3.12%
Non-denominational	1	3	4	12.5%
Theist	1	0	1	3.12%
Seventh-day Adventist Agnostic	1	0	1	3.12%
Education				
Some College credit; no degree	3	1	4	12.5%
Associate's degree	0	1	1	3.12%
Vocational training	1	0	1	3.12%
Bachelor's degree	10	7	17	53%
Master's degree	2	4	6	18.75%
Professional degree	0	1 (J.D)	1	3.12%
Doctoral degree	0	2	2	6.25%
Currently in School	3	6		
	*2 Medical students *1 PhD student	*2 PhD students *2 Master's students *1 Dental school student *1 completing B.A.	9	28%
Total Income range:	No-income	>$60,000		
Employment Status: Employed	13	11	24	75%
Childhood Family Structure				
Parents were married	5	8	13	41%
Single mother-not partnered homes	5	0	5	16%
Divorced homes	2	3	5	16%
Blended families	2	1	3	9%
Homes headed by Grandparents	2	1	3	9%
Multiple home configurations	0	3	3	9%
Length of Relationships	3 months	7 years	Median: 1 year-11 ½ months	

Procedures

Participants were included if they met the following criteria: (a) Adults ages 22-40 years old, (b) at least one person within the relationship had to identify as African American, (c) that had to be "in a committed relationship" with a member of the opposite sex for a minimum of 3 month; and spoke English. Potential participants were excluded if: (a) individuals fell outside of the age bracket, (b) previously married, (c) individuals had a history of abuse, and (d) individuals had a current mental health condition preventing informed consent or normal interview exchanges.

Potential study participants were initially recruited via emails sent to a number of professional organizations in southern California: the California Association of Marriage and Family therapists and a number of therapists in private practice working with young adult African American couples. Emails were also sent to community institutions and gatekeepers: the California Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and local area African American churches. Incentives for each participant included a $5 gift card.

Informed Consent Process

Upon referral and first contact with potential research participants, members of the research team explained the purpose of the study and provided an opportunity for participants to ask questions. If interested, an interview date, time, and location was arranged. in a setting of the participants' choice where privacy could be maintained. Demographic data (age in years, sex, length of relationship, seriousness of relationship, type of relationship, contact frequency, future of relationship, satisfaction with

relationship on a Likert scale from 1-10, level of education, occupation, yearly income, children, involvement in religion, religious affiliation, and family background) was obtained in written form to the participant prior to the interview (5 minutes maximum). The qualitative interviews lasted 45 to 90 minutes. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. The PI and student researcher verified transcribed interviews by listening to the recordings while reviewing the transcript word by word. During this process, all personal identifiers were removed and a couples'/interview code were assigned to protect confidentiality.

Data Collection

Aligned with Grounded Theory principles by Charmaz (2014), all interviews were conducted using a semi-structured preliminary interview guide. The interviews open-ended questions regarding the history of their relationship, their recollections of their relationship with their parental figures during their formative years, couples responses to perceived challenges, and their concept of commitment. Data collection continued until saturation of major concepts and categories were achieved. In addition to the interview data, all project team members (PI, student researcher) maintained theoretical memos to augment the development of the theoretical scheme as we reviewed recorded and transcribed interviews.

Data Analysis

Data analyses were also guided by Charmaz' grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014). All transcripts were coded with these frameworks in mind as well as

for possible emerging themes using a three-step analysis (Creswell, 1998) to ensure that the content of participant interviews is deciphered with as little interference from preconceptions as possible. To be aware and attempt to set aside preconceptions all coders explored attitudes, biases, fears, and areas of not knowing that predispose my thinking about young adult African Americans navigating non-marital relationships. In step two, general themes within and between participants were identified, using an unstructured method called open coding. In step three, open codes were grouped together under higher order axial or category codes which were explored for differences or similarities. Throughout, two main criteria were used to evaluate the accuracy of an emerging theory: (a) Does it fit the situation? and (b) does it work (i.e., does it help the person make sense of his or her relationship patterns)? (Glaser,1992).

Results

In this section, we report the results of how early key figures partially influenced the interactive process of 16 African American couples striving (were they striving for?) for long-term intimacy in southern California. Key findings of the current study are divided into three main sections. The first section discusses the four emergent patterns of family background influences described by participants: (1) parental engagement and relationship undermined by competing factors, (2) parental engagement and relationship cultivated by intentionality, (3) parental engagement and relationship deprived by absenteeism, and (4) parental engagement and relationship strained by circumstances. Of note, the second section provides a pictorial illustration of how most couples did not share similar backgrounds, further complicating their relationship growth. Furthermore,

this applied to both dating as well as already married couples. As couples exercised their personal and collective agency, they reported going through a 3-stage process of reconfiguration: Awareness stage, Adjustment stage, and Acceptance stage. Participants approached the process differently with different outcomes: (1) Some couples were intentional and effective, (2) some couples were intentional and entangled, (3) some couples were unintentional but eventually effective, (4) some couples were unintentional and entangled.
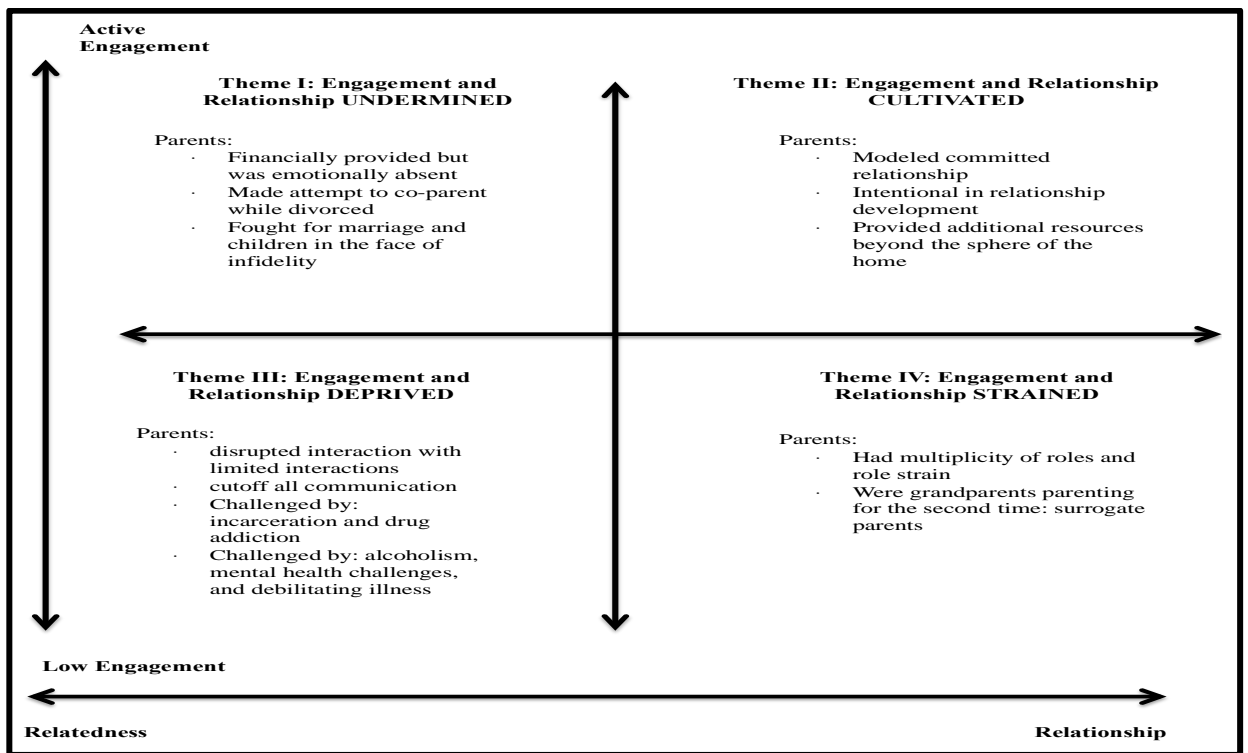
Section I: The Four Family Background Patterns

Figure 1. Family background patterns of couples

Theme I: Engagement and Relationship undermined by competing factors. In this theme, participants recounted parents as: being financial providers but emotionally absent

(especially fathers), attempting to co-parent while divorced, and fighting for the children

and marriage in the face of infidelity. Participants reported the issue of parents providing

financially while being emotionally absent. Girlfriend, Couple #8 in reference to her

father: *he's really work-oriented, so that's where he spent most of his time. I didn't see*

him a lot growing up. And in high school, I could go two or three days without seeing him

because of his work schedule. In response, participants desired more engagement and

relationship with father who is present and yet emotionally absent. Girlfriend, Couple #8:

I had a really good friend growing up, and her dad did everything with her, …like games,

and hanging out and shopping, he was just a very active dad. And I wish I had that.

Participants also detailed parents attempting to be engaging and present while divorced.

Husband, Couple #3: *That 50/50 custody kind of like created a whirlwind with me*

because the two moms were very different environments. In response, there was a sense of

identity loss and resentment towards one parent. Husband, Couple #3:

> "I had a lot of resentment against my dad because I feel like he caused my mom
> all this trouble. So really like I said it created this whirlwind environment with
> myself where I had like no identity because I'm one way over here and I'm one
> way over there."

Participants also pointed out the experience of parents in the midst of marital challenges.

Wife, Couple #9:

> "Even though my parents were married…their marriage was nothing short of
> horrible. It was really bad… it was difficult to see and it was difficult to be a part
> of. There was a lot of infidelity on my dad's side, it was just craziness. And my
> mom just stayed the whole time because she had us and she wanted us to have
> both parents in the house."

In response, she became the protector in the family. Wife, Couple #9: *It just always put*

me in a position where I just I felt like I had to protect everyone. I was trying to protect

my sister, I was trying to protect my mom.

Theme # II: Engagement and Relationship cultivated. In this theme, participants recounted their experiences with their parents that left them feeling positive in trying to replicate what they saw as success in their parents marriage: modeled relationship within the context of marriage, overprotective in extreme cases, intentional in relationship development, and providers of additional resources. Participants also reported their responses to parents with implications for their current relationship. Participants detailed two primary types of relationship modeling. In the first type of relationship modeling, parents were described as committed yet not much, if any, affection/intimacy displayed. Girlfriend, Couple #11*: I feel like my parents, once they became parents, their relationship suffered in some way, as far as the romantic side of things.* In response, participants from this particular parent-participant experience would have desired to observe more of the romantic side from parents. Girlfriend, Couple #5:*I wish I would have seen more affection, because [boyfriend] is very affectionate, [chuckle] and I don't necessarily know how to handle that.* In the second type of relationship modeling, parents were reported as committed parents with affection/intimacy displayed. Girlfriend, Couple #16: *my parents are very affectionate towards each other.* In response, participants from this particular parent-participant experience expressed contentment and adopted their experience as a method of interaction interpretation. Girlfriend, Couple #16: *it makes me feel happy to see that…*and it's *the biggest way I interpret love.* Participants also characterized parents as intentional in their guidance of relational development. Girlfriend, Couple #5: *I've always been taught that when you get into a relationship, it's not something that you take lightly. It's somebody else's feelings, It's another person that you are trying to intertwine with and get to know and understand.* In response,

participants of such parent-participant experience tended to be intentional, clear and have

realistic understanding about relationship goals with the confidence to demand the

aforementioned. Before couple #5 started dating, girlfriend revealed the following to

boyfriend. Girlfriend, Couple #5:

> "Ultimately, if you're gonna date me, we're not just dating for fun, we're dating
> for real. And you have to understand who I am as a person, and some of the
> character flaws that I bring to the table that you're gonna have to deal with. If you
> can't handle this, then I suggest that you don't even try."

Theme III: Engagement and Relationship deprived by the absence of a parent. In

this theme, participants recounted their relationship with parent(s) disrupted by: forced

and limited interactions, parental cutoff, challenges to parental duties due to incarceration

and drug addiction, and challenges to fulfilling parental duties due to mental health

challenges, alcoholism, and debilitating illness. Participants noted their relationship with

parents was often disrupted by limited interactions. Boyfriend, Couple #2: *My dad came*

around like some weekends. And I think it was mainly because she (mother) would make

him because she didn't want to look like the typical Black single parent in front of

baseball people. With very limited and at times perceived forced interactions with one of

the parents, participants of such experience felt deprived of a relationship model resulting

in their own perceived lack of competence in their role as a partner. Boyfriend, Couple

#2: *I have no idea what I'm doing…there was really no examples.* Some participants did

not get the chance to have meaningful engagement with a parent because they were cut-

off completely. Husband, Couple #10: *I do not know my mom. My mom left when I was*

three… I have abandonment issues…from my mom's family, 'cause, basically they all

knew that I existed. Participants' detailed challenges to fulfilling parental duties such as a

lengthy time spent incarcerated and drug addiction. In a sarcastic tenor, Boyfriend,

Couple #6 expressed: *My dad... He likes to be in jail, so he and I, we haven't actually talked since I was 13… My mom and my dad would be stable except that he really likes drugs.* In response, when his father reached out to him upon his released from jail at the age of 21, he cut off his father. Boyfriend, Couple #6: *Nah, we'll figure this out later.* Alcoholism, mental health challenges, debilitating illness were challenges participants parents wrestled with. Girlfriend, Couple #1: *He left because of his alcohol addiction and he was also bipolar and so my mom and I were in danger because of his manic attacks so he left and my mom was actually ill, she had lupus.* As a result, participants were quick to grow up and overwhelmed in carrying a load best fitted for parents. Girlfriend, Couple #1:

> "I was the only child so I had to grow up fast so I had to learn how to cook I had to learn how to do a lot of stuff to help my mom…it was hard to not have my dad I hated him."

Participants also struggled with self-worth and the ability to have a relationship with a man. Girlfriend, Couple #1: *It wasn't that I didn't want to (be a good partner)- its that I couldn't…I didn't know my worth. My dad didn't tell me.* This highlights the desire for relationship and meaningful interaction with both parents and the effect of a missing parent.

Theme IV: Engagement and Relationship strained by circumstances. In this theme, participants recounted parents as: having a multiplicity of roles and a serious case of role strains; grandparents as surrogate parents parenting for a second time. Participants reported when their parents had a multiplicity of roles, they experienced role strain and, as the child, partial abandonment. Boyfriend, Couple #8:

> "My mother, she's kind of similar to [girlfriend's] father, she worked a lot, like multiple jobs and there's nights where... Not days, I could go throughout the

whole day and not see her until she's coming to sleep. So there's not a lot of communication. "

As a result, participants talked about struggles with transitioning into adulthood, not just relationships but also all other kinds of "growing up" since they had no one to guide them. Boyfriend, Couple #8: *I wish I just learned more about adulthood, and the transition from school and college into adulthood... Or getting ready to start a family, just the little things, I wish I kind of had more of those conversations.* Given the parental role strain and lack of interactions due to the role strains and stress on the family unit, quite a few grandparents started parenting for a second time. Girlfriend, Couple #6:

"I was raised by my grandparents, particularly my grandmother, because my grandfather's really isolative… My dad was always dating some new person, so [laughter]…that's not a stable thing. And then, my mom lived with her mother, and so, she also, in and out. "

In response, participants had a tendency to pattern their relationship interactions based on their grandparents' interaction. Girlfriend, Couple #6: *how I interact with him is because that's how my grandparents interacted. It's kind of a business exchange, but eventually you get to the love. [laughter] But you just gotta wait it out.*
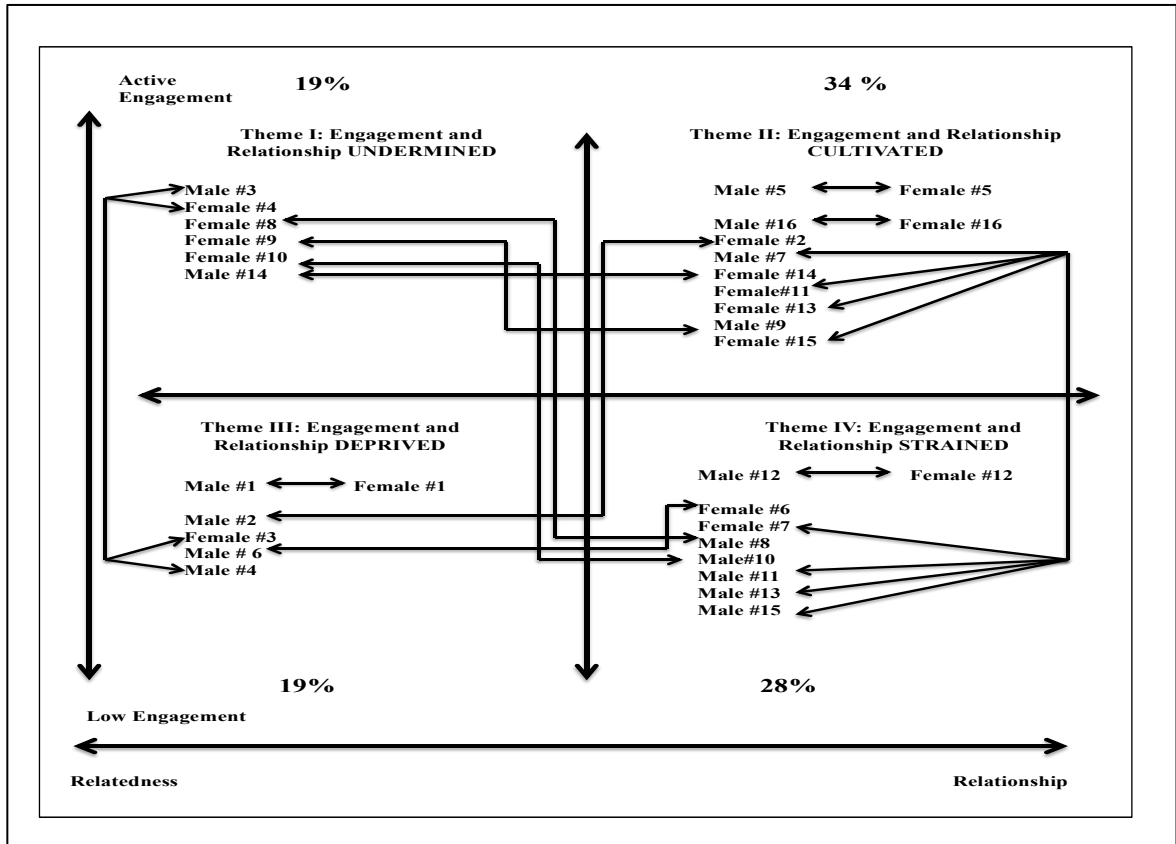
Figure 2. Couple matches by theme/typology and relationship status

Figure 2 provides a pictorial illustration of how couples match by theme/typology and relationship status. As seen, 19% of participants were from Theme I, 34% of participants from Theme II, 19% of participants from Theme III, and 28% of participants from Theme IV family background. Yet, there were no participants from Theme I that dated a partner from the same family background. Only two couples dated a partner from the same background in Theme II, one couple each in Themes III and IV. Therefore only a small percentage of couples (12.5%) matched from an advantageous family backgrounds and compatible in terms of their respective families mirroring one another, which allowed for

a smoother transition and greater chance of success. Two other couples matched in different themes, Couple #1 in Theme III, and Couple #12 in Theme IV. Yet those couples had challenges given the nature of their earlier parent-participant interactions or lack thereof. Couple #12, was quite mature in nature and dating seriously but had to overcome great differences. Overall, 87.5% of the study participants were dating partners from a different family background, which often produced challenges the couples had to work through.

The Three-Stage Process of Reconfiguration

Figure 3. The Three Stage Process and Patterns of Approach and Outcome

Although couples dated and married from different family backgrounds, they exercised personal and collective agency to reconcile differences. As couples responded

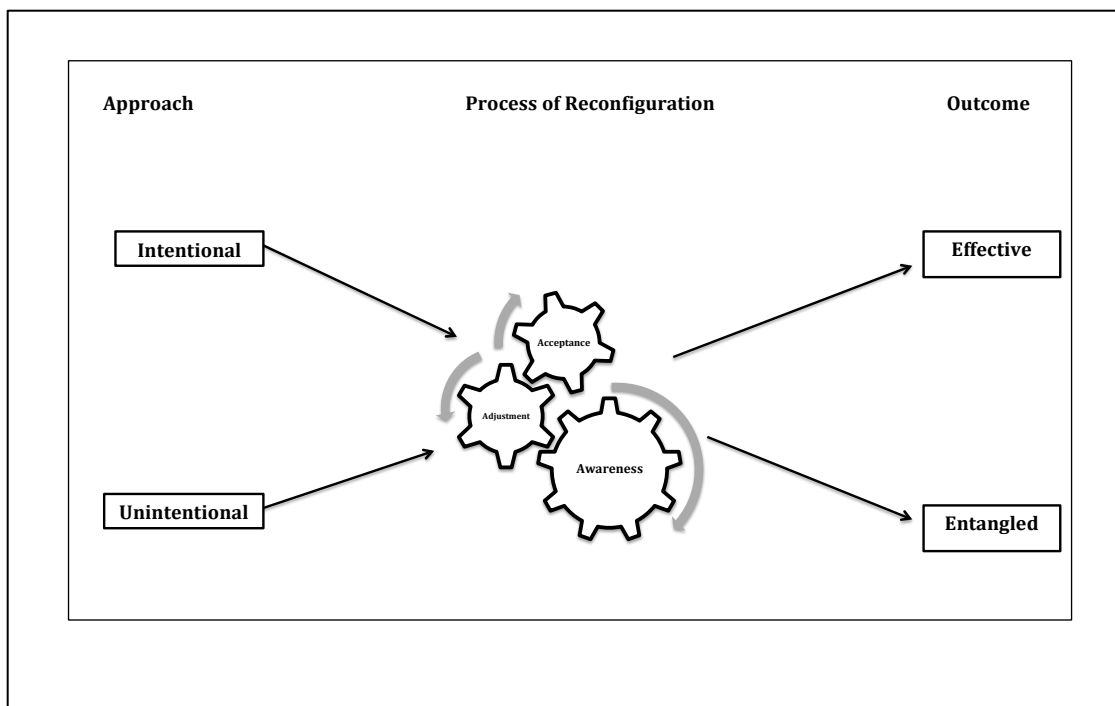to the challenges, they experienced a 3-stage process of reconfiguration illustrated in Figure 3: awareness, adjustment, and accepting stage. Couples approached the 3-Stage process of reconfiguration differently and encountered different outcomes.

Four Major Patterns of Approaches and Outcomes

Figure 3 also provides a pictorial example of four major patterns of responses emerged as participants sought to overcome differences: (1) some couples were intentional and as a result effective in going through the process, (2) some couples were intentional and as a result got entangled, (3) some couples were unintentional but as a result eventually effective, (4) some couples were unintentional and as a result got entangled.

Pattern #1: Intentional and Effective. To overcome differences and empower the relationship process couples inevitably encountered, some couples were intentional in establishing a framework early on, which allowed them to explore, address, and work through their differences in a non-threatening and productive manner. In addition, establishing a framework early brought shared meaning to the first stage of the process, Awareness stage. During this stage couples discovered latent assumptions, values, opinions, and expectations within themselves and their partner about relationships and life. One particularly interethnic couple, currently engaged, went out to eat to discuss timeframes for becoming an official couple and discover within the confines of intentions juxtaposed to impulse. Couple #14-Boyfriend (African-American; Theme 4): *We went to Olive Garden one night actually…and we talked about our time frames…*Girlfriend (Latina; Theme 2) added context: *To get to know each other so we wouldn't do something*

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stupid and impulsive. In establishing timeframes early on, the couple was able to navigate the challenges of race and ethnic differences especially within their respective families. Boyfriend worried*: how is my family gonna feel if I end up dating her. How are they gonna react if I decided to bring her home...Because she's not black.* The girlfriend on the other hand talked about the framework her family saw African Americans had:

> "But because African-Americans had been, the butt of the jokes in my family growing up, they weren't necessarily like nasty, racist jokes. But my mom was always like, "She's scared of black men, she would see a black man and scream."

She later talked about her own personal struggles and questions even while dating boyfriend: *I did question it for a while, I did struggle with it, even while we were officially dating, I still asked myself, "Am I attracted to him?" We went through that, it was really rough…*Yet the couple was able to work through the differences on a personal level, interpersonal level, and familial level. Currently the couple is engaged as a result of establishing a framework that allowed them to process their differences and confront the issues in a manner where they were able to accomplish their relationship goals.

Pattern #2: Intentional and Entangled. While some couples were intentional and successful in establishing a framework early on, some couples while being intentional became entangled in unresolved issues from earlier parent-participant interactions. While cohabiting, couple #4 who come from different family backgrounds (typologies- see table 1), had unresolved issues with their respective fathers: boyfriend's father was absent physically and emotional (Theme 3), girlfriend's father was physically present but emotionally absent (Theme 2). However, girlfriend's father and boyfriend had one crucial similarity: they both would lie to girlfriend #4, which in turn, has entangled the couple's

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relationship in a perpetual cycle of distrust, frustration, and disappoint. Girlfriend #4 reported:

> "For me, it's the lies. As I said, my dad is also a pathological liar… I cannot tolerate the lies…the reasons that he (boyfriend) has felt the need to lie to me about certain things, frustrates me. That is something huge that it upsets me, it disappoints me, it hurts me and it bothers me to know it, the lies."

Boyfriend responded, that the girlfriend *can't handle the truth.* Although boyfriend seems to have checked out, girlfriend was willing to get outside help to move beyond their entangled unresolved differences. Girlfriend #4:

> "Something I definitely do think that should happen with us is counseling. I think that, that is something that would be beneficial to both of us, whether it's for our self issues or our joint issues as a couple being together, co-parenting and whatever the future may hold. So, I think that those are our work-throughs."

However, with the boyfriend not interested in this, it is not boding well for the success of this couple. One party ready for outside help while the other party has no interest are places where couples get entangled.

Pattern #3 Unintentional and Effect. Some couples drifted into their relationship until a major event (e.g. break up) is precipitated by one party as a drastic measure to bring attention to the state of their relationship with the goals of aligning. Awaken to the prospect of having lost their partner one party or the couple goes through a reorganization of priorities to become aligned if they are to move forward again together. The role of break up has been a significant claxon in couples becoming united in goals. The second stage of the process, Adjustment stage, finds footing along a spectrum from the small actions to major events like breaking up. During the adjustment stage, as couples began the process of awareness, participants reported attempts in trying to manage, negotiate, and shift personal feelings, expectations, assumptions, and rules in order to align with

partner. The following couple, Couple #15, addresses why the break up and the impact of their breakup in helping become intentional and aligned in goals. Girlfriend: *The break up was the best thing that happened to our relationship.* Boyfriend:

> "We got to a point where, I had my nose down doing whatever... Whether it was working or not…like, "I'll figure it out in a year and if she's still there it'll work out," that kinda thing. Not really being intentional with the relationship kinda thing. Just doing my own thing and hoping that when it works out she'll be ready, she'll still be around, that kind of thing. Not really taking care of anything. "

> For them, the breakup forced intentionality, vitality, and openness into their relationship.

> Couple #2 went through a similar breakup experience with differences in openness before and after the breakup. The couple broke up for 14 months. During that time, boyfriend had much time to reflect and accepted the fact he needed to make adjustments and let go of perspectives that would keep the couple separated. It is during the final stage of the process, the Accepting stage, participants come to the realization that letting go of previously held symbols and methods of interacting that created, maintained, and promoted differences with partner was necessary in order for their partnership to thrive and to find shared meaning. Boyfriend, Couple #2 (Theme 3) recounted the condition of the couple prior to breaking up. Boyfriend #2:

> "It took us a while. To be like open because I think that we both set ourselves up on a pedestal and ended up holding the other one to the same pedestal. And so it was just like is it going to be disappointing if they know this or that?"

> Girlfriend, Couple #2 (Theme 2) described the couple's interactions post-Breakup. Girlfriend:

> "Like this time around when we got back together. He was able to show me a little bit more of him. it wasn't until when he asked me to come back that he was able to be like OK well ok this is what's bothering me from the last time so I felt now that he I can see more of him. More of a vulnerable side because he kind of

hides that. But now that he's showing that to you more. I can feel comfortable to share with him even if it has nothing to do with him but it's something that I'm going through. It's a lot easier to talk to him because I know I can trust him with that information. "

The role of separation as a tool is used to bring a sense of urgency to the needs of one party but to issue an alarm as adjustments are made and couples may struggle but some come to a level of accepting and being more receptive to their partner.

Pattern #4: Unintentional and Entangled. Preoccupied in the moment, some couples were not intentional and became entangled in the process. The following couple (married-Couple #9) describes their earlier lack of intentions prior to their decision to marry. Husband (Theme 2):

> "Well initially, I wasn't really trying because I just got out of a relationship. So I wasn't really trying to be in a relationship, so I was just hollering at her. She was cool. I wanted to get to know her but nothing serious, for real."

The *w*ife (Theme 1) recalled taking a similar relationship stance: *I was on the same page. We were not interested in anything serious.* Currently, the couple is married and described their partnership as follows: Husband:

> "We didn't get a chance to be married, once we got married … everything took front seat to the marriage…so we didn't really click. We never got a chance to click after we got married. And there was a lot of baggage brought into the marriage... I can say I personally brought (baggage) into the marriage, that really held us off from actually being married as well. A lot of relationships that I held onto that weren't good for the marriage, again put the marriage to the back burner. "

Wife:

> "There's always something that comes up. And even if we may be at a point where to a certain extent we're starting to try to get into a cycle or a system, it seems like we just always get derailed, quickly."

In hindsight, husband questioned his marriage decision: *"Is marriage... Is this something that I can deal with for the rest of my life?"* In hindsight, wife noted*:*

> "I think it's so easy when you get caught up in a new relationship to just get caught up and forget about everything else, or to see warning signs and run right past them 'cause you're like, "Oh, no it'll be fine."

The aforementioned example is also a reenactment of wife's relationship with her father. She noted (see exert in Theme I) her father had problems with infidelity and husband has hinted at holding on to certain previous relationships detrimental to their marriage.

Relationship Formation Theory: A Pathway to Human Agency
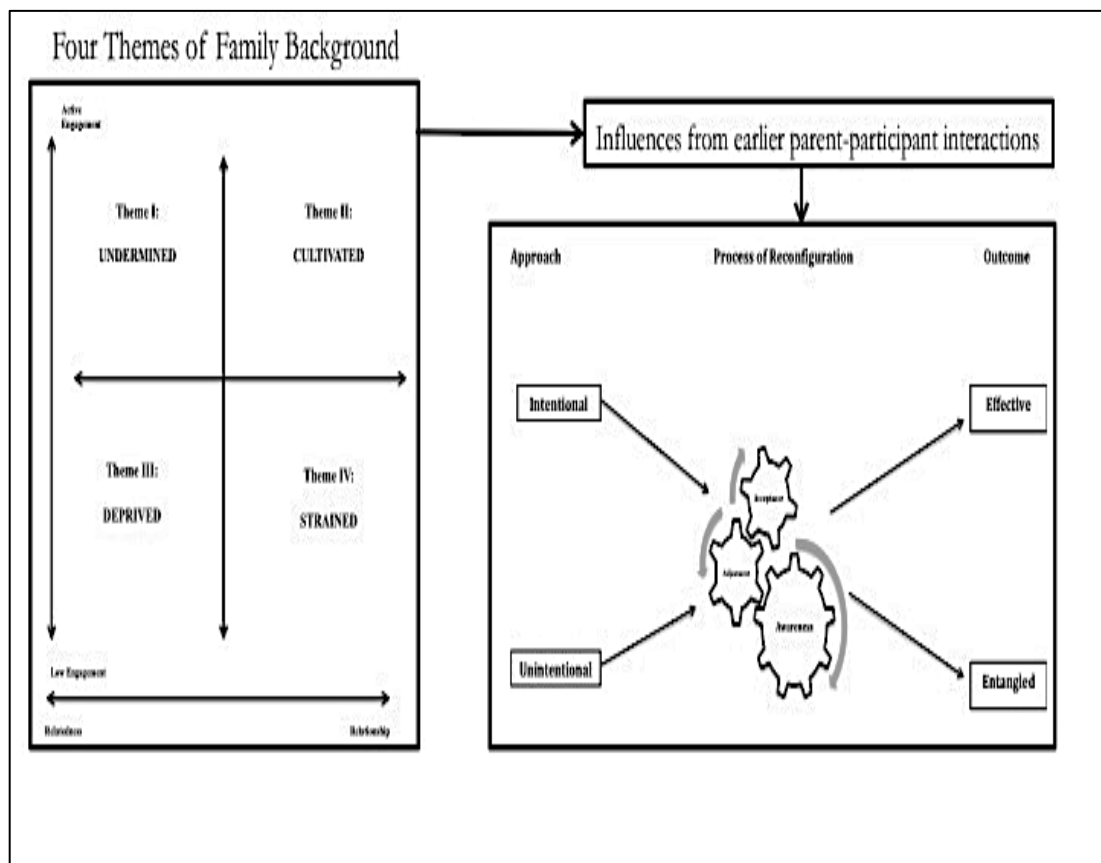

Figure 4: Relationship Formation Theory: A Pathway to Human Agency

This emergent theory posits that long-term intimate relationship formation begins with earlier sustained patterns of interactions, socialization, based on two orthogonal axes: (a) active engagement versus low engagement, and (b) relatedness vs. relationships. Each dimension consists of two components: (1st) parent-parent interactions, (2nd) parent-participant interactions. Along these two intersecting concepts, four themes of family background emerged as reference groups that created participants' perspectives on long-term intimate relationships. The four emerged themes were: (1) Engagement and Relationship undermined by competing factors, (2) Engagement and Relationship cultivated by intentionality, (3) Engagement and Relationship deprived by absenteeism, and (4) Engagement and Relationship strained by circumstances. Each of the four aforementioned emerged family backgrounds also had long-lasting influences with implications for forming long-term intimate relationships.

The first family background, engagement and relationship undermined by competing factors, was characterized as the following: a parent who satisfied financial needs but were emotionally unavailable to participants, secondly, parents attempting to co-parent conjointly while divorced, and finally, parents who fought for their marriage for the sake of the participants in the face of infidelity. As a result of the competing factors undermining interactions between parent and participants, participants in this particular family background desired more engagement and relationship with the emotionally absent parent, experienced a lost of identity and resentment, and became parentified to help referee their parents relationship in order to maintain stability.

The second family background, engagement and relationship cultivated by intentionality, was described as the following: parents modeling committed relationship

through marriage, intentional in relationship development/education, providing additional resources beyond the sphere of the home. As a result, participants desired more of the romantic side from their committed parents, some expressed contentment of parents romantic side, and participants were clear, intentional, and realistic in relationship goals.

The third family background, engagement and relationship deprived by parent absenteeism, was reported as the following: disrupted interactions with limited interactions, emotional cutoff of all communication, parents were challenged with incarceration, drug addiction, alcoholism, mental health challenges, and debilitating illnesses, and abdication of parental duties. As a result, participants struggled with a lack of competence in their role as a partner, abandonment issues, different coping mechanisms such as cutting parents off completely, struggles of self-worth.

The fourth family background, engagement and relationship strained by circumstances, was distinguished as the following: parents had multiplicity of roles and experienced role strain, grandparents parenting for the second time as surrogate parents. As a result, participants struggled with transitioning into adulthood in general, and patterned their relationship interactions after grandparents' relationship.

Participants entered relationships from a reference group/family background developed by sustained interactions of parent-parent interactions, and parent-participant interactions. Given the differences in role models, values, schemas of ideal partners, gender expectations, acquired qualities, methods of interpreting love, and differences in personal relationship standards, most couples approached their relationships with either, intentionally or unintentionally, from different family backgrounds. Matching from different family backgrounds presented many challenges for couples, particularly in two

ways, (1) on the familial level- different reference group, and (2) different mental representations on a personal level.

As couples attempted to confront the developmental tasks of working through their differences, couples experienced a 3-stage process of reconfiguration: (1) an awareness stage, (2) adjustment stage, and (3) and acceptance stage. During the awareness stage couples discovered latent assumptions, values, opinions, and expectations within themselves and their partner about relationships and life. During the adjustment stage, as couples began the process of awareness, participants reported attempts in trying to manage, negotiate, and shift personal feelings, expectations, assumptions, and rules in order to align with their partner. During the accepting stage, participants came to the realization that letting go of previously held symbols and methods of interacting from family backgrounds that created, maintained, and promoted differences with partner was necessary in order for their partnership to thrive and to find shared meaning for the goal of long-term intimacy.

Discussion

In light of the fact that African Americans value marriage immensely and yet spend more time outside of marriage more than any other racial group in the United States, the primary purpose of the present study was to explore if and how earlier relationships affect subsequent intimate relationships (Raley et al., 2007; Sassler, 2010). The literature, in large part, focuses primarily on African American relationships on a structural/institutional level attending to how their relationships relate to other institutions or varies from one historical period to another (Cherlin, 2005; Johnson & Loscocco,

2015; Patterson, 1998; Pinderhughes, 2002; Pinsoff; 2002; Weber, 1998). Yet, our findings, in part, suggest while there is some measure of interplay between internal family dynamics of everyday family life and the family as an institution embedded within a larger sociocultural context, the study findings primarily speaks to how the experience of earlier family life influenced participants as they transitioned through intimate relationships but also the interactions and actions taken from members of the couple to construct lasting relationships.

As couples attempted to create and maintain long term relationships, their efforts were informed by their family backgrounds which functioned as a types of reference group that aided in creating and shaping perspective on marriage based on the types of sustained parent-participant interactions or lack thereof. Theme one, parental engagement and relationships undermined by competing factors, give meaning to the fact that when certain participants had to interfere into their parental subsystem to play peacemaker between two fighting parents, participants prematurely entered such parental subsystem accompanied by detrimental implications for current and future relationships.

The aforementioned issue speaks to the process of parentification. The process of parentification occurs when the child is elevated from the sibling subsystem to the parental subsystem without proper delegation, or the child takes on an adult position to maintain a balance in the family system (Engelhardt, 2012; Hooper, 2007; Byng-Hall, 2002). There are implications for relationship formation as scholars noted parentification is linked to lower competence in interpersonal relationships if unresolved (Engelhardt, 2012; Hooper, 2007; Macfie, Houts, et al., 2005).

In addition to parentification, an issue pertinent to the formation of relationships is 'the feminization of poverty.' One participant (husband, Couple 3) noted he entered his relationship with a lot of resentment towards his father from the pain of divorce in which he witnessed and experienced his mother undergoing years of pain and financial challenges. This particular participants speaks to what scholars have termed 'the feminization of poverty.' The feminization of poverty is defined by Medeiros and Costa (2008), as an increase in the share of women or female-headed households among the poor. Alexandra Cawthorne (2008) specifically noted one of the contributing factors to women living in poverty here in the United States is due to the fact women are more likely to bear the economic costs of raising children when the parents are not living together. Custodial mothers are twice as likely to be poor as custodial fathers. In addition, 55% of all black families with children are lead by single women and female-lead families are five times more likely to live in poverty (Haskins, Sawhill, & McLanahan, 2015). Husband, Couple #3 referred to feminization of poverty and the effects of it as his mother went financial hardship while his father lived well.

Theme two, engagement and relationship cultivated by parents, highlighted the benefits of coming from a two-parent home where parents were motivated to sustain the complex and demanding job of parenting. This theme also underscored the different components of parenting: a buffer against adversity, mediator of damages in the forms of protecting children from harm, setting and enforcing boundaries to ensure safety, and optimizing children's potentials and maximizing the opportunities of using it (Gage, et. Al., 2006; Hoghughi, 1998). Participants from this theme had a more positive outlook towards relationships in general and from the results has given evidence there is little to

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no disconnect in terms of marriage ideals and relationships. In addition, some study participants' experienced overprotective parenting (Husband, Couple #9) and research suggests overprotective parenting shields children from natural life challenges and opportunities to develop skills for managing difficulties (Bayer et. Al., 2006; Parker, 1983). Such parenting lead children to develop aversive cognitions about themselves and the world (Bayer et. Al, 2006). Husband, Couple #9 even questioned his decision to get married as he went through a process of disillusion.

The third theme, engagement and relationships deprived by absentee parents, underscored the personal challenges parents themselves had to confront in order to execute functional parenting. Alcoholism, drug addictions, lengthy incarceration times, mental health challenges, debilitating illnesses and the outright abdication of parental duties sheds light into the struggles that called for participants into survival mode at earlier ages. Participants reported struggling with clarity in gender role within a context of their relationship, a sense of agency to transition from dating to marriage, and confidence in their ability to be receptive to the influence of their partners haven been vulnerable and hurt by a parent. Furthermore, participants seemed to have experienced a sense of ambiguous loss.

Ambiguous loss is defined as a loss that remains unverified without any resolution (Boss, 2016). There are two types of ambiguous loss: type 1 is when participants do not know where there missing parent is located, whether alive or dead due to the complete cutoff (Boss, 2016). Type 1 ambiguous loss may apply to participants whose parents completely cutoff the relationship or any form of interaction. The parent while physically absent but becomes psychologically present because there is no evidence of present loss.

Type 2 ambiguous loss is mores psychological in nature. A parent may be present physically but missing psychologically due to cognitive impairment, memory loss, injury, addiction, or obsession (Boss, 2016). Type 2 ambiguous loss may have relevance to participants from theme III but also participants from theme I and to a certain degree theme IV for parents that are missing due to work, or strain from multiplicity of roles.

Theme four, engagement and relationship strained by circumstances, speaks to the issues of one parent having multiple roles as provider, care taker, and much more which places significant stress on the family unit. This theme also attends to grandparents parenting for a second time. Many participants from theme four originated from homes raised by grandparents due to a number of factors including the parents incapacity to provide adequate care for their children (Doley et. Al., 2015; Dunne & Kettler, 2008; Edwards & Mumford, 2005). As result, children placed in the care of their grandparents are much more likely to have experienced early trauma, hardship, and/or deprivation than children who remained with their parents (Doley et. Al., 2015).

The couples in this present study mostly came from different family backgrounds, hence reference groups, as only two out of sixteen couples had matching family backgrounds and the remaining fourteen couples had different family backgrounds. This speak to the challenges briefly discussed in the introduction section and literature review pertaining to assortative matching. Assortative matching is the nonrandom matching of individuals into relationships (Schwartz, 2013) within groups (endogamy) or without groups (exogamy) and between people with similar (homogamy) or dissimilar (heterogamy) traits (Schwartz, 2013). As couples experience relationships with more deviations from endogamous reference groups (exogamy and heterogamy), it presents

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unique sets of challenges as potential husbands are expected to be superior to their wives in education, income and career achievement according to the mating gradient theory (Dixon, 2009). Closely tied to this concept is the research of Jessi Streib (2015), who provides insight from different social classes opposed to different family backgrounds. Streib (2015) noted the class differences attracted partners to one another, which is quite similar to participants in this study yet later on, the differences needed to be managed because the effects of social class are not erased by educational and occupational experiences. Although this study pertains to family backgrounds influencing the interaction of participants within their relationship, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that family backgrounds have shaped every aspect of participants while exchanging differences. The differences eventually needed to be manage in order for the relationship to continue. Dating and marrying out of family background was difficult and hard for couples but it did not define the relationship as doomed to fail. During the accepting stage, participants come to the realization that letting go of previously held symbols and methods of interacting that created, maintained, and promoted differences with partner was necessary in order for their partnership to thrive and to find shared meaning.

Limitations

Although this research contributes to parent-child relationships, and couple's relationship in the African American community, it is not without its limitations. The most obvious of which is the use of self-reports by the participants which may or may not be an accurate description of how parent-child relationship and their effects on the couple's relationship interactions in real social situations. In addition, the limitation to

this study is the Seventh-day Adventist population which may not be the most accurate representation of the overall African American population given their subcultural values, mores, and norms that informs, to various degrees, their relationship practices.

Implications

The results suggest five important goals for family life educators and clinicians: (a) help couples explore their parent-child social interactions and the effects on their family backgrounds, (b) address potential barriers and opportunities in becoming more receptive to the influence of partner, (c) introduce information and encourage discussions that expands the third party resources available to couples, (d) help couples use the influence received from partner as strengths and opportunities for growth and development, and (e) help couples develop the strategies that support and maintain the trajectory of a long-term commitment.

Future Direction of Research

The results of this study suggest a number of future directions for research aimed at understanding or exploring relationship formation, specifically as parents influence relationship interactions, among educated African Americans. In particular, future research should examine educated couples entering relationships with children and the process of integrating two families. There was one couple who entered into relationship with children and briefly spoke about the process of integrating their new families while simultaneously working through relationships with their own parents and the complications inherent in the process. Another couple noted that they introduced a baby

into their family after having entered in a cohabiting relationship and it completely changed their dynamics. Future research should explore this area of interest. Lastly, future research should study the social norms, conventions, and mores of subcultures and how they influence parent-child relationships as it pertains to relationship formation.

Finally, the experience of relationships in family of orientation is often repeated with future partners and children in all ethnic groups. However, a study of African Americans in relationship should not be equated to only single mothers, or single parents. As researchers seek to understand new models of understanding relationship formation in the African American community, the educated and religious groups are important segments of the population to explore.

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CHAPTER SIX

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study was one of a few studies to explore if or how earlier primary relationships influence young African Americans navigating through relationships towards marriage from a unique conceptual framework: Object Relations Theory, Symbolic Interaction perspective, Life Course Developmental perspective (Boss et Al., 2004; Charon, 2010; White, Klein, Martin, 2015). It calls attention to the formative influence of early social interactions with primary key figures and it underscores the processes of how 16 young African American couples primarily residing in southern California, between the ages of 22-39, use their power of agency to create, negotiate, and define new shared meaning with their partner from earlier primary relationship interactions. This chapter will, first, locate the emerged theory of agency among a spectrum of theories, discuss the meta-findings of the publishable paper, the modifications made from the original research proposal, strengths and limitations, implications for clinical work, and future research.

Location of the Emerged Theory of Agency

Prior to delving into the discussion on the meta-findings of this study, the authors wish to locate the emerged theory of agency within the theoretical range of abstraction and scope of content. As previously stated, there are approximately seven different types of theories within the field of family sciences. Meta-theories, in general, are broad in scope of content and high in abstracted global concepts (Boss et. Al, 2004). Such theories involve the entire field of knowledge in Family Studies juxtaposed to a smaller scope like

the scope of this study's topic: Young African Americans creatively navigating

relationships towards marriage (Boss et. Al, 2004). Theoretical frameworks, broad in

scope and high in level of abstractness, describe most of the broad family theories. Also,

the aforementioned is usually a framework derived from outside the field of Family

Studies. Although conceptual frameworks provide focus and inquiry they must be filled

in by specific theories and data in certain areas (Boss et. Al, 2004).

Analytical typologies provide representations of features of the social world and

considered more abstract than middle-range theories because of their application to a

broad scope of content area (Boss et. Al, 2004). Formal propositional theories are a set of

abstract statements with the purpose of explaining certain types of phenomena. The

propositions range from the more abstract to the specific (Boss et. Al, 2004). Middle-

range theories while more abstract then causal models and empirical generalizations, are

not as broad in scope of content or as high along the abstract gradient like meta-theories.

Middle-range theories are confined to a particular domain and tested by a variety of

studies as well as methods (Boss et. Al, 2004). . The emerged theory for this study is

considered a middle-range theory based on the results, which is more abstract then causal

models and empirical generalizations, however, not as broad in scope of content or as

high along the abstract gradient of meta-theories.

Causal models are usually more complex empirical generalizations or models that

are tested in a study, often times by means of path analysis or structural equation

modeling (Boss et. Al, 2004). Empirical generalizations are summaries of research

finding linked to other research findings and to some general ideas about a research topic.

Empirical generalizations are lowest along the level of abstraction gradient and narrowest

along the scope of content (Boss et. Al, 2004). It is the research goal of the authors to link the emerged theory of agency to other research findings by testing it and creating causal models.

Meta-Findings and Meaning of Findings

The meta-findings of this study resulted in a middle-range theory and finds footing within the study's purpose. As noted earlier, the primary purpose of this present study was to qualitatively explore the disconnect between marriage attitudes and the lack of marriage reality based in empirical evidence by investigating if and how earlier relationships affect subsequent intimate relationships of 16 young African American couples in non-marital and marital relationships (Sassler, 2010; Raley et al., 2007). To best interpret the middle-ranged theory of agency, we formulated a unique conceptual framework as a lens for the interpretation of the results.

The unique conceptualize framework, Object relations theory, life course developmental framework, and symbolic interactionism, synthesized, posits that the formation of intimate relationships, which begins early with the interaction of primary key figures, is an important life course process and key developmental task, especially during emerging and throughout adulthood and is best explored within the agentic process of social interactions (Charon, 2010; Bandura, 2001). Specifically, the Life Course Development specifically highlights transitions, which consist of developmental stages, events, and timing (Boss et al., 2004) but most important development as a series of tasks as it relates to relationship development (Hutchison, 2015). In addition, Charon (2010) highlights a few points on Symbolic Interactionism critical to the understanding of

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our findings with relevance to move the scholarly conversation beyond some of the limitations of earlier findings while building on their strengths as well. One of the central ideas of symbolic interaction is that what one does depends on current social interactions (Charon, 2010). The results indicated earlier parent-participant interactions formed a reference group. The four different families represented four different types of reference groups that aided in creating and shaping perspective on marriage based on the types of interactions or lack thereof. The meanings of the results will be discussed in further detail.

Question #1: What kind of relationship did participants have with early key figures/parents? Our findings suggest that there were four major family background influences: (1) parental engagement and relationship undermined by competing factors, (2) parental engagement and relationship cultivated by intentionality, (3) parental engagement and relationship deprived by absenteeism, and (4) parental engagement and relationship strained by circumstances.

Theme I: Parental engagement and relationships undermined by competing factors give meaning to the fact that, for participants, it wasn't not enough to simply come from a two-parent home. A parent who is physically present to support only financially but not emotionally could have an equally detrimental effect to the formation of intimate relationships as to an absentee parent(s). In addition, when participants have to interfere or referee in the parental subsystem to play peacemaker, and with little choice choose between two fighting parents, participants becomes a parent before time accompanied by detrimental implications for current and future relationships. This issue speaks to parentified participants in relationships and therefore gives some level of

insight into the gap between the ideals for marriage and the realities of missing the marriage marker. The process of parentification occurs when the child is elevated from the sibling subsystem to the parental subsystem without proper delegation, or the child takes on an adult position to maintain a balance in the family system (Engelhardt, 2012; Hooper, 2007; Byng-Hall, 2002). There are implications for relationship formation as scholars noted parentification is linked to lower competence in interpersonal relationships if unresolved (Engelhardt, 2012; Hooper, 2007; Macfie, Houts, et al., 2005).

While Theme I points to the fact that its not enough for participants to simply come from a two-parent family structure, Theme II, engagement and relationship cultivated by parents, highlights the benefits of coming from a two-parent home where parents are motivated to sustain the complex and demanding job of parenting. This theme also underscores the different markers of engaged and active parenting: a buffer against adversity, mediator of damages in the forms of protecting children from harm, setting and enforcing boundaries to ensure safety, and optimizing children's potentials and maximizing the opportunities of using it (Gage, et. Al., 2006; Hoghughi, 1998). Participants from this theme had a more positive outlook towards relationships in general as they experienced the aforementioned components of parenting and as the results indicate there is less of a disconnect between marriage ideals and relationships.

The third theme, engagement and relationships deprived by absentee parents, stresses the effects of lacking from earlier parent-participant interactions which seems to correlate to a great degree with the disconnect between ideals and marriage reality. In addition, this theme underscores the personal challenges parents themselves had to confront in order to execute functional parenting as participants were helplessly

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triangulated in the parents personal challenges during their formative years. Alcoholism, drug addictions, lengthy incarceration times, mental health challenges, debilitating illnesses and the outright abdication of parental duties sheds light into the struggles that called for participants into survival mode at earlier ages. Participants reported struggling with clarity in gender role within a context of their relationship, a sense of agency to transition from dating to marriage, and confidence in their ability to be receptive to the influence of their partners haven been vulnerable and hurt by a parent. Furthermore, participants seemed to have experienced a sense of ambiguous loss.

Ambiguous loss is defined as a loss that remains unverified without any resolution (Boss, 2016). There are two types of ambiguous loss: type 1 is when participants do not know where there missing parent is located, whether alive or dead due to the complete cutoff (Boss, 2016). Type 1 ambiguous loss may apply to participants whose parents completely cutoff the relationship or any form of interaction. The parent while physically absent but becomes psychologically present because there is no evidence of present loss. Type 2 ambiguous loss is mores psychological in nature. A parent may be present physically but missing psychologically due to cognitive impairment, memory loss, injury, addiction, or obsession (Boss, 2016). Type 2 ambiguous loss may have relevance to participants from theme III but also participants from theme I and to a certain degree theme IV for parents that are missing due to work, or strain from multiplicity of roles.

Theme IV: engagement and relationship strained by circumstances speaks to the issues of one parent having multiple roles as provider, caretaker, and much more which places significant stress on the family unit. With one parent playing multiple roles, one aspect or many aspects of the parent-participant relationship suffers due to the role strain.

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The difference between Theme II and Theme IV is the fact that circumstances such as the death of a partner/spouse, the separation of a partner with no sharing of responsibilities strains or limits parental time for engaging and cultivating relationships that empower and encourage positive attitudes and modeling towards marriage.

Question #2: How did these (interactions from family background) influence participants as they entered intimate relationships? Our findings suggest there were a variety of ways, both positive and negative, in which participants were influenced by the four different family backgrounds.

Theme I participants, whose relationship to their parents were undermined by the competing factors of work, unhealthy functioning between parents, extramarital relations, and the co-parenting differences between divorced parents influenced participants in ways that, at times, placed them in challenging positions. For instance, one participant became parentified (Wife, Couple #9) (see exerts in Result section), while another participant (husband, Couple 3) noted he entered his relationship with a lot of resentment towards his father from the pain of divorce in which he witnessed and experienced his mother undergoing years of financial challenges. This particular participants speaks to what scholars have termed 'the feminization of poverty.'

The feminization of poverty is defined by Medeiros and Costa (2008), as an increase in the share of women or female-headed households among the poor. Alexandra Cawthorne (2008) specifically noted one of the contributing factors to women living in poverty here in the United States is due to the fact women are more likely to bear the economic costs of raising children when the parents are not living together. Custodial mothers are twice as likely to be poor as custodial fathers. Husband, Couple #3 referred

to feminization of poverty and the effects of it as his mother went financial hardship while his father lived well.

Theme II participants, whose relationship was cultivated by invested and intentional parents, seem to have entered their relationships with intentional and clear relationship goals (Girlfriend, couple #5) mostly by family backgrounds but also the experience of previous intimate relationship. Another participant noted, having had a good experience with his parents from childhood, it would be his desire to replicate the same family patterns (Boyfriend, couple #5) and therefore entered his intimate relationship with a sense of purpose, level of seriousness, oriented towards courting juxtaposed to dating for fun. Another participant (Girlfriend, Couple #16) entered her relationship with an appreciation for her committed parents affectionate interactions. She used her parent's example as a personal method of interpreting how or if her boyfriend loves her. Although some participants came from two-parent committed homes, some would have appreciated more affection from their parents (girlfriend, Couple #11; girlfriend, Couple #5).

Closely tied to the aforementioned is Sternberg's theory of triangular love, specifically companionate love where the love is present in the form of long-term marriages but the passion is no longer present (Sternberg, 1997). Some study participants experienced overprotective parents (Husband, Couple #9). Research suggests overprotective parenting shields children from natural life challenges and opportunities to develop skills for managing difficulties (Bayer et. Al., 2006; Parker, 1983). Such parenting lead children to develop aversive cognitions about themselves and the world

(Bayer et. Al, 2006). Husband, Couple #9 even questioned his decision to get married as he went through a process of disillusion.

Theme III participants entered relationships by and large with a sense of ambivalence. Boyfriend, Couple #1 and #2 noted due to a lack of models and close experiences with their father, they felt incompetent in their gender roles within the relationship and at times they were fearful of being receptive or vulnerable to their partner. Closely linked to the fear of being receptive to their partner is the Relational Dialectics Theory that addresses the typical dialectical tensions experienced by partners based on the research by Leslie Baxter and W.K. Rawlins. The theory notes there are three primary ongoing tensions played out within a relationship: integration-separation, stability-change, and expression-nonexpression (Baxter, 2004). The participants noted that the aforementioned tensions were constant through out their interactions and many times it was a process of learning. At times, couples have noted they discontinued their relationship (Couple #2, Couple #14, Couple #15) because one partner didn't open up enough and they felt alone in the relationship, or there were anxieties around uncertainty, and the failure or struggle to balance connection while seeking personal space.

In Theme IV, some participants entered relationships with the desire to learn more about adult transitioning (Boyfriend, Couple #8). Other couples noted having a lack of competence in gender role within the relationship as discussed earlier and struggles with the concept of love (Girlfriend, Couple #6) given there was a lack of modeling and instability with biological parents. Many participants from Theme IV came from homes raised by grandparents due to a number of factors including the parents incapacity to provide adequate care for their children (Doley et. Al., 2015; Dunne & Kettler, 2008;

Edwards & Mumford, 2005). As result, children placed in the care of their grandparents are much more likely to have experienced early trauma, hardship, and/or deprivation than children who remained with their parents (Doley et. Al., 2015).

Question #3: Do couples match on these patterns, and if not, what happens? 2 out of 16 couples had matching family backgrounds. 14 out of 16 couples had different family backgrounds. This speak to issues briefly discussed in the introduction section and literature review pertaining to assortative matching. Assortative matching is the nonrandom matching of individuals into relationships (Schwartz, 2013) within groups (endogamy) or without groups (exogamy) and between people with similar (homogamy) or dissimilar (heterogamy) traits (Schwartz, 2013). Closely tied to this concept is the research of Jessi Streib (2015), who provides insight from different social classes opposed to different family backgrounds. Streib (2015) noted the class differences attracted partners to one another, which is quite similar to participants in this study yet later on, the differences needed to be managed because the effects of social class are not erased by educational and occupational experiences. Although this study pertains to family backgrounds influencing the interaction of participants within their relationship, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that family backgrounds have shaped every aspect of participants while exchanging differences. The differences eventually needed to be manage in order for the relationship to continue. Dating and marrying out of family background was difficult and hard for couples but it did not define the relationship as doomed to fail.

Question #4: As couple's seek to create their own relationship pathways and shared meanings, what is the character of couple's interactive process as they strive

towards long-term intimacy? Our findings noted couples responded to the challenges of coming from different family backgrounds by undergoing a 3-stage process of reconfiguration of perspectives: Awareness, Adjustment, and Accepting stage. During the awareness stage, couples discovered latent assumptions, values, opinions, and expectations within themselves and their partner about relationships and life. The very act of awareness is one of protest, one of resistance, and defiance to fight for the relationship as the very act indicates something is wrong, something is not right and yet that is the start of a new beginning, a new pathway to a different kind of relationship. The second stage of the process, adjustment stage, finds footing along a spectrum from the small actions to major events like breaking up. During the adjustment stage, as couples began the process of awareness, participants reported attempts in trying to manage, negotiate, and shift personal feelings, expectations, assumptions, and personal relationship rules in order to align with their partner. During this stage participants engage in two primary developmental tasks: (1) overcoming self-centeredness/ relinquish certain symbols from earlier parent-participant interactions meaningful to them but not the couple, (2) accepting their partner as worthy and as real (not in an idealized or in an infantile manner of relating) through a committed willingness to create shared symbols with partner in spite of challenges. The final stage, acceptance stage, is one where participants come to the realization that letting go of previously held symbols and methods of interacting that created, maintained, and promoted differences with partner was necessary in order for their partnership to thrive and to find shared meaning

Four major patterns of responses emerged as participants sought to overcome their family background differences: (1) Some couples were intentional and effective, (2)

some couples were intentional and entangled, (3) some couples were unintentional but eventually effective, and (4) some couples were unintentional and entangled.

Although parents may have lasting impressions on participants, the evidence of the study sheds light on the fact that participants are not passive, imprisoned, or slaves to the effect of their parents. The ongoing dialogue to find common shared meaning with their partner and their commitment to the process of intimacy becomes a new reference group, and with this new reference group with new perspectives, and with new perspective comes different actions.

Modifications from Original Research Proposal

There were a few modifications from the original research proposal. The most important change was the addition of Symbolic Interactionism perspective to the unique conceptual framework. While engaging in the analysis of the data, the authors realized the participants engaged with one another through the meaning of symbols/ mental representations and it was important to include such framework to best analysis the data effectively. Symbolic Interactionsim provides context for understanding how the earlier social interactions formed a sort of reference group that creates perspective and in turn perspective helps define situations. However, it doesn't stop there. Such experiences are not destiny as hinted at in some of the previous literature (Cherlin, 2005; Patterson, 1998; Pinderhughes, 2002; Pinsoff; 2002). Society and history precedes the individual but it does not supersede agency. As participants exercised their agency, it's worth noting that the simply act of awareness from the participants gives indication that something is wrong…something is not right and yet that is the start of a new beginning. Also, to

wrestle with self and wrestle with their partner to mitigate earlier formed perspectives is also significant to the process of creating shared meaning for long-term commitment and eventually marriage.

Other minute but notable changes from the original research proposal was: changing the age range from 25-40, to 22-40 after a challenge of finding couple's willing to participate within that specified age bracket. Therefore, expanding the pool of participants allowed for a diverse set of responses. In addition, the authors decided to interview 16 couples opposed to 17-22 after reaching a point of saturation. Finally, the interview guide was modified during the collection of data to better reflect the type of responses generated during the interviewing process.

Strengths

The current study has several strengths. It collected information on parent-participant relationship and how it influenced the participants relationship interactions from both partners, which enhances the probability of identifying the specific progression and patterns of reenactment in the relationships. In addition, the grounded theory approach allows for the latent processes within participants and within partners to become clear. Third, the study also allows for the study of a group considered as a subculture within the religious groups, the African American community, and the United States at large and there is not a lot of studies in the literature specifically on an educated, religious, primarily African American population.

Limitations

Although this research contributes to parent-child relationships, and couple's relationship in the African American community, it is not without its limitations. The most obvious of which is the use of self-reports by the participants. The self-reports from their perception of events may or may not be an accurate description of how parent-child relationship and their effects on the couple's relationship interactions in real social situations. In addition, given the transient nature of this sample, majority of them residing in California only because of educational pursuits, there was not sufficient time or participants to conduct a focus group. The focus group would have been able to provide further nuanced patterns concerning the connection between parents and participants as it relates to their relationships. Last, the study design is not without limits as the in-depth aim and focus only allows generalization of results within a small region, southern California, as it relates to the overall population of the African American community, mostly east of the Mississippi river.

Clinical Implications

The analysis suggests five important goals for family life educators and clinicians: (a) help couples explore their parent-child social interactions and the effects on their family backgrounds, (b) address potential barriers and opportunities in becoming more receptive to the influence of partner, (c) introduce information and encourage discussions that expands the third party resources available to couples, (d) help couples use the influence received from partner as strengths and opportunities for growth and

development, and (e) help couples develop the strategies that support and maintain the trajectory of a long-term commitment .

Future Direction of Research

The results of this study suggest a number of future directions for research aimed at understanding or exploring relationship formation, specifically as parents influence relationship interactions, among educated African Americans. In particular, future research should examine educated couples entering relationships with children and the process of integrating two families. There was one couple who entered into relationship with children and briefly spoke about the process of integrating their new families while simultaneously working through relationships with their own parents and the complications inherent in the process. Another couple noted that they introduced a baby into their family after having entered in a cohabiting relationship and it completely changed their dynamics. Future research should explore this area of interest. Lastly, future research should study the social norms, conventions, and mores of subcultures and how they influence parent-child relationships as it pertains to relationship formation.

Finally, the experience of relationships in family of orientation is often repeated with future partners and children in all ethnic groups. However, a study of African Americans in relationship should not be equated to only single mothers, or single parents. As researchers seek to understand new models of understanding relationship formation in the African American community, the educated and religious groups are important segments of the population to explore.

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RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

Email Recruitment Script

E-mail Subject line: Request to Participate in Study about African American Dating Relationships. All Participants will receive $5 gift card/One of first 25 participants will receive a $100 gift card

Hello,

My name is Moosgar Borieux and I'm currently a doctoral student in the Family Studies program at Loma Linda University. I am conducting my dissertation research on how early childhood family relationships influence current adult intimate relationships for African Americans.

We are requesting your participation in a 45-90 minute semi-structured interview to gain a deeper understanding of the significant influence of family life on intimate relationship patterns for African Americans. The results from this study will be confidential and presented in a publishable manuscript and presentations at both local and national conferences. This study has been reviewed by the Loma Linda University IRB.

Inclusion Criteria:

(a) Adults ages 25-40 years old,

(b) Participants must be African American (meaning at least one parent is African

American and must be born here in the United States),

(c) Must be in an intimate relationship with a member of the opposite sex for a minimum

of 3 months

Exclusion Criteria:

(a) Previously married

If you complete the interview, you will receive a $5 gift card to Amazon.com for your participation. Also, the first 25 participants to enroll in the study will be placed in a drawing for a $100 gift card to Amazon.com.

If you have questions about the interview or any other aspect of the study, please feel free to email a member of the team at the email listed below.

We would like to thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

If you align with the inclusion/exclusion criteria above and choose to participate, please respond to this email with your preferred contact information.

Moosgar Borieux - Student Investigator | mborieux@llu.edu | (256) 289- 3802
Jackie Williams-Reade, PhD – Primary Investigator | jwilliamsreade@llu.edu

INFORMED CONSENT

LOMA LINDA UNIVERSITY

School of Behavioral Health

Informed Consent

Young African Americans Navigating Non-Marital Intimate Relationships

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:
Dr. Jackie Williams-Reade, Associate Professor, Department of Counseling and Family Sciences, School of Behavioral Health
10655 Campus Dr., Griggs Hall #207
Loma Linda, California 92350
W: (909)558-4547 x47025
jwilliamsreade@llu.edu

WHAT IS THIS FORM?
This form is called a Consent Form. It will give you information about the study so you can make an informed decision about participation in this research. This is a student dissertation study conducted for academic credit by Moosgar Borieux under the guidance of Jackie Williams-Reade, PhD.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?
The purpose of this research study is to explore how relationships with childhood parental figures play a role in romantic relationship decisions, goals, and response to conflict. With your help, we can better understand why some dating relationships leads to marriage while other dating relationships lead to other types of intimate relationships.

The reasoning for this study comes from the fact that African Americans are considered the least likely to marry, when they marry, they do so later and their marriages are more likely to be disrupted compared to other racial groups. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of how young African American couples approach intimate relationships may lead to new insights and suggestions for family life education and family planning policies.

WHO IS ELIGIBLE TO PARTICIPATE?
You must meet the following requirements to be in the study:
- You are between the ages of 25-40 years old
- You are African-American

- At least one parent is African-American
- You are born here in the United States
- Must be in an intimate relationship (dating, cohabiting, courting, engaged etc.) with a member of the opposite sex for a minimum of 3 months

You can not participate in this study if you:
- Are outside the age bracket
- Are not African American
- Currently have a mental health condition.

We will interview about 3 cohabiting couples, 5 dating couples, 3-5 couples in counseling, 2 engaged couples, and 2 newly married couples until there is no more new information from interviewees. The participants will be asked whether they would like to come back for an individual interview and also at a later date to participate in a focus group.

HOW WILL I BE INVOLVED IN THIS STUDY?

Participation in this study involves the following:
- You will complete a demographic/personal information questionnaire.
- As a couple you are expected take part in an audio-recorded interview regarding your childhood memories of your relationship to your parents, how you think that particular relationship influence your current intimate relationship, previous intimate relationship experiences, and the role of commitment together.
- If one member of the couple would like to do an individual interview separate of the couples interview and participate in a focus group, the options will be presented on the demographic form.
- The interview will last approximately 45-90 minutes. The audio-recorded interview will take place at a site that is private and convenient for you.

WILL I RECEIVE ANY PAYMENT FOR TAKING PART IN THE STUDY?

If you decide to participate, we would like to interview you at your earliest convenience. You are expected to interview as a couple for one interview. If you desire, you can decide if you would like to participate at a later date in a focus group. In return for your time and participation, you will receive a $5 gift card to Amazon.com after your participation in the study. The $5 gift card will be given to participants at the end of the session upon completion of the interview.

CAN I STOP BEING IN THE STUDY?

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. If you agree to be in the study, but later change your mind, you may drop out at any time. There are no penalties or consequences of any kind if you decide that you do not want to participate. If you decide to participate but change your mind in the process of being interviewed, the recordings from the audio recording device will be destroyed immediately. If you participate but decide at the end you do not want the interview as part of the data collection, all recordings and transcription will be destroyed immediately by deletion and/or shredding physical copies.

You will receive a gift card at the completion of the interview for your time and contribution, even if you change your mind at the end.

WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?

Take as long as you like before you make a decision. We will be happy to answer any question you have about this study. If you have further questions about this project or if you have a research-related problem, you may contact Moosgar Yrveens Borieux (student researcher) at (256) 289-3802 or Dr. Jackie Williams-Reade at the School of Behavioral Health, Loma Linda, California 92350 by phone: (909)558-4547 x47025 for more information. If you wish to contact an impartial third party not associated with this study regarding any questions about your rights or to report a complaint you may have about the study, you may contact the Office of Patient Relations, Loma Linda University Medical Center, Loma Linda, CA 92354, phone (909) 558-4647, e-mail patientrelations@llu.edu for information and assistance.

WHAT ARE MY BENEFITS OF BEING IN THIS STUDY?

The interview offers participants the opportunity to discuss their relationship experiences as it potentially relates to childhood family relationships. The sharing of personal experiences, relationship goals, and ideas about role transitions is sometimes beneficial for those who participate. You will also help others better understand the potential benefits of family life education as well as individual and family therapy as it relates to the African American community.

WHAT ARE MY RISKS OF BEING IN THIS STUDY?

The primary risk of participating in this study is that your confidential answers could be compromised. In order to minimize this risk, every effort will be taken to ensure your privacy. In order to keep your answers confidential, we will not include your name or any personal information in the interview record, and this consent form will be kept separately from the written record of your answers. The interview will be audio recorded and your answers will be typed into a document. The recording and document will be stored in a locked cabinet. In addition, when materials are stored electronically, a password-protected computer will be used to further protect your confidentiality. Only the primary investigator and doctoral student will have access to your answers. All interviews will be recorded into a digital voice recorder. The digital voice recorder is a device with protective guards (i.e. different digital files). Upon completion of the recorded interviews, all recordings will be immediately transferred to a password protected laptop. Audio recordings on the digital voice recorder and laptop will be destroyed once all recordings have been transcribed. In particular, the transcripts, informed consent document, and demographic questionnaire will be kept for three years and then destroyed by the following: sending all documents on computer to electronic trash bin, printed paper will be shredded, and information on digital voice recorder will be deleted. Please be advised that although the researchers will take every precaution to maintain confidentiality of the data, the nature of the interview prevents the researchers from guaranteeing full confidentiality given that one of the partners may compromise confidentiality by sharing with others outside the interview. The researchers would like to

ask and remind participants to respect the privacy of your fellow participants. If the results of the research data are published or discussed at conferences, no identifiable information will be used.

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

By signing this consent form, I am giving my permission to be interviewed about how my childhood family relationships potentially influence my current relationship interactions. I understand that I may choose not to answer any question and that I may stop participating at any time. I also understand that while confidentiality cannot be fully guaranteed, every effort will be made to protect my personal information and to keep my answers confidential.

I have read the contents of this consent form and have listened to the verbal explanation given by the interviewer. My questions concerning the interview have been answered to my satisfaction. I hereby give voluntary consent to participate in this interview.

Signature of Subject	Printed Name of Subject

Date

INVESTIGATOR'S STATEMENT

I have reviewed the contents of this consent form with the person signing above. I have explained potential risks and benefits of the study.

Signature of Investigator	Printed Name of Investigator

Date

LOMA LINDA UNIVERSITY

School of Behavioral Health

Married Couple Informed Consent

Young African Americans Navigating Non-Marital Intimate Relationships

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:
Dr. Jackie Williams-Reade, Associate Professor, Department of Counseling and Family Sciences, School of Behavioral Health
10655 Campus Dr., Griggs Hall #207
Loma Linda, California 92350
W: (909)558-4547 x47025
jwilliamsreade@llu.edu

WHAT IS THIS FORM?
This form is called a Consent Form. It will give you information about the study so you can make an informed decision about participation in this research. This is a student dissertation study conducted for academic by Moosgar Borieux under the guidance of Jackie Williams-Reade, PhD.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?
The purpose of this research study is to explore how relationships with childhood parental figures play a role in romantic relationship decisions, goals, and response to conflict. With your help, we can better understand why some dating relationships leads to marriage while other dating relationships lead to other types of intimate relationships.

The reasoning for this study comes from the fact that African Americans are considered the least likely to marry, when they marry, they do so later and their marriages are more likely to be disrupted compared to other racial groups. However, given your marital status, your participation in this study will be a valuable contribution as it allows us to compare and contrast your experience to other couples in the dating phase. Furthermore, your participation provides us with a comprehensive understanding of how young African American couples approach intimate relationships, which may lead to new insights and suggestions for family life education and family planning policies.

WHO IS ELIGIBLE TO PARTICIPATE?
You must meet the following requirements to be in the study:
- You are between the ages of 25-40 years old
- You are African-American
  - At least one parent is African-American
  - You are born here in the United States

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- Must be married with a member of the opposite sex for a minimum of 3 months but no more than 5 years

You can not participate in this study if you:
- Are outside the age bracket
- Are not African American
- Currently have a mental health condition.

HOW WILL I BE INVOLVED IN THIS STUDY?

Participation in this study involves the following:
- You will complete a demographic/personal information questionnaire.
- As a couple you are expected take part in an audio-recorded interview regarding your childhood memories of your relationship to your parents, how you think that particular relationship influence your current intimate relationship, previous intimate relationship experiences, and your decision to get married.
- If one member of the couple would like to do an individual interview separate of the couples interview and participate in a focus group, the options will be presented on the demographic form.
- The interview will last approximately 45-90 minutes. The audio-recorded interview will take place at a site that is private and convenient for you.

WILL I RECEIVE ANY PAYMENT FOR TAKING PART IN THE STUDY?

If you decide to participate, we would like to interview you at your earliest convenience. You are expected to interview as a couple for one interview. If you desire, you can decide if you would like to participate at a later date in a focus group. In return for your time and participation, you will receive a $5 gift card to Amazon.com after your participation in the study. The $5 gift card will be given to participants at the end of the session upon completion of the interview.

CAN I STOP BEING IN THE STUDY?

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Health, Loma Linda, California 92350 by phone: (909)558-4547 x47025 for more information. If you wish to contact an impartial third party not associated with this study regarding any questions about your rights or to report a complaint you may have about the study, you may contact the Office of Patient Relations, Loma Linda University Medical Center, Loma Linda, CA 92354, phone (909) 558-4647, e-mail patientrelations@llu.edu for information and assistance.

WHAT ARE MY BENEFITS OF BEING IN THIS STUDY?

This interview offers participants the opportunity to discuss their relationship experiences as it potentially relates to childhood family relationships. The sharing of personal experiences, relationship goals, and ideas about role transitions is sometimes beneficial for those who participate. You will also help others better understand the potential benefits of family life education as well as individual and family therapy as it relates to the African American community.

WHAT ARE MY RISKS OF BEING IN THIS STUDY?

The primary risk of participating in this study is that your confidential answers could be compromised. In order to minimize this risk, every effort will be taken to ensure your privacy. In order to keep your answers confidential, we will not include your name or any personal information in the interview record, and this consent form will be kept separately from the written record of your answers. The interview will be audio recorded and your answers will be typed into a document. The recording and document will be stored in a locked cabinet. In addition, when materials are stored electronically, a password-protected computer will be used to further protect your confidentiality. Only the primary investigator and doctoral student will have access to your answers. All interviews will be recorded into a digital voice recorder. The digital voice recorder is a device with protective guards (i.e. different digital files). Upon completion of the recorded interviews, all recordings will be immediately transferred to a password protected laptop. Audio recordings on the digital voice recorder and laptop will be destroyed once all recordings have been transcribed. In particular, the transcripts, informed consent document, and demographic questionnaire will be kept for three years and then destroyed by the following: sending all documents on computer to electronic trash bin, printed paper will be shredded, and information on the digital voice recorder will be deleted. Please be advised that the researchers will take every precaution to maintain confidentiality of the data.. If the results of the research data are published or discussed at conferences, no identifiable information will be used.

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

By signing this consent form, I am giving my permission to be interviewed about how my childhood family relationships potentially influence my current relationship interactions. I understand that I may choose not to answer any question and that I may stop participating at any time. I also understand that while confidentiality cannot be fully guaranteed, every effort will be made to protect my personal information and to keep my answers confidential.

I have read the contents of this consent form and have listened to the verbal explanation given by the interviewer. My questions concerning the interview have been answered to my satisfaction. I hereby give voluntary consent to participate in this interview.

_____
Signature of Subject

_____
Printed Name of Subject

_____
Date

INVESTIGATOR'S STATEMENT

I have reviewed the contents of this consent form with the person signing above. I have explained potential risks and benefits of the study.

_____
Signature of Investigator

_____
Printed Name of Investigator

_____
Date

APPENDIX C

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

This is a study that will help us better understand the process of how early parent-child relationships influence current relationship interactions among African American couples. We will ask you a series of questions that are worded in such a way to help you think out loud about some of the realities of dating, cohabiting, courting etc. There is no right or wrong answer—we are interested in learning how you think: your opinions, experiences, and your unique ideas. We will ask you some questions that invite you to think aloud about a wide variety of ideas that come to mind about these issues. I am interested in hearing all of your thoughts about these complex questions. Please take your time answering these questions.

We will start with a few brief questions that will help us understand you a bit better:

<div align="center">General:</div>

1) What is your gender
   a. Male
   b. Female

2) Where were you born? _____

3) Where were you raised? _____

4) What is your age?
   a. 25-29
   b. 30-34
   c. 35-40

5) How do you define your current relationship? What do you call it?
   a. Dating
      i. How long have you been dating your current partner? (weeks/months/years)

6) How would you describe your dating relationship in terms of its seriousness?
   a. Casual – dating for fun, no intent to marry

      b. Serious – dating with some conversation or intent to marry

      c. Courting – dating with specific intent to marry, both parties agree they want to marry at some point

      d. Other?

7) Type of current relationship

      a. New

      b. Casual

      c. Stable

      d. Serious

      e. Are you currently cohabitating with your partner?

            i. Yes

          ii. No

      f. Formal engagement

            i. If engaged, how long did you date before getting engaged?

          ii. How long have you been engaged?

      g. Married

            i. If married, how long have you been married?
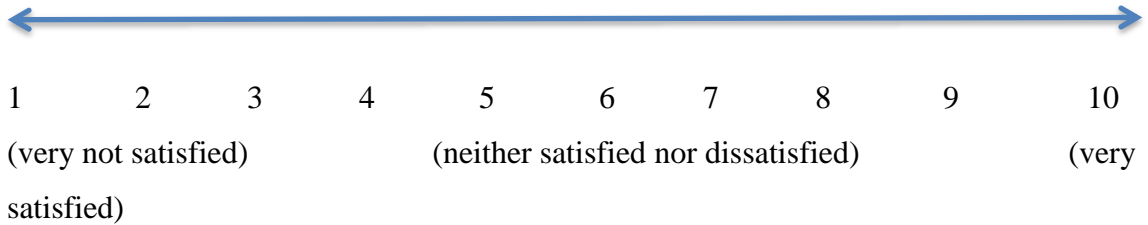
          ii. Date married:

8) Contact frequency

      a. More than once a day

      b. Every day

      c. Several times a week

      d. Once a week

      e. Once every two weeks

      f. Once a month

      g. Less than once a month

9) Future of the relationship

      a. My partner will break it off

      b. I will break it off

      c. We will stay together

    d. We will get married

10) Current satisfaction with relationship: Scale of 1 to 10

1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

(very not satisfied)   (neither satisfied nor dissatisfied)   (very satisfied)

11) Education: What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed? *If currently enrolled, highest degree received.*

    a. No schooling completed

    b. Nursery school to 8th grade

    c. Some high school, no diploma

    d. High school graduate, diploma or the equivalent (for example: GED)

    e. Some college credit, no degree

    f. Trade/technical/vocational training

    g. Associate degree

    h. Bachelor's degree

    i. Master's degree

    j. Professional degree

    k. Doctorate degree

12) What is your occupation?

_____

13) What is your total household income?

    a. Less than $10,000

    b. $10,000 to $30,000

    c. $30,000 to $60,000

    d. $60,000 or higher

14) Do you have children? If not, skip to question #15

If so, how many children live in your household?

_____

15) How many children live in your household who are:

   a. Less than 5 years old? _____

   b. 5 through 12 years old? _____

   c. 13 through 17 years old? _____

1) How involved are you in religion:

    a. Not at all

    b. Somewhat involved

    c. Involved

    d. Very much involved

17) Please describe your identity/affiliation in terms of spirituality, religion, or other identity.

Religious

    If Religious, which denomination/affiliation:

    Please describe:

Spiritual

Please describe:

Agnostic

Please describe:

Atheist

Please describe:

Other (please specify)

Please describe:

If you are affiliated with a religious or spiritual group/organization/denomination (Protestant, Buddhist, Please list:

Childhood Family

2) Family Structure: Please circle

Two-parent family, married (both biological parents married)

Two-parent family, not-married (both biological parents, not married)

Single-parent family (raised by one biological parent, not partnered)

Stepparent family married (one biological parent/one stepparent, married)

Stepparent family not-married (one biological parent/one stepparent, not-married)

Adoptive family, non-biological parent, both partners married

Adoptive family, non-biological parent, both partners not married

Kinship family? Adopted or raised by relative(s). Which relative?

Same-sex parents (one biological parent, one partner)

Other family structure. Please describe

19) Do you have siblings?
   a. No
   b. Yes,
      i. If yes, how many?

ii. If so, what is your birth order? (first child, second child, etc.)

Further Interviews:

If you are interested, please circle the following options:
1. I am interested in doing a separate individual interview.
2. I am interested in participating in a focus group.
3. None of the options interest me.
4. I am willing to participate in an individual interview and focus group.

INTERVIEW GUIDE

History of the Relationship:
1. Please tell me about the story of how you met. What qualities attracted you to each other?
2. What were some ideas you had coming into the relationship about your roles? The roles of your significant other? [What values, goals…etc.]
3. Have they changed? In what ways?

Childhood

1. Describe the members in your family:
    a. Mother
        i. Which aspect of your mother's love did you desire the most?
        ii. What did you have to do to get that aspect of her love?
        iii. What couldn't you be in order to receive that aspect of her love? What were the things that seemed to displease her about you?
    b. Father
        i. Which aspect of your father's love did you desire the most?
        ii. What did you have to do to get that aspect of his love?
        iii. What couldn't you be in order to receive that aspect of his love?
    c. Brothers
    d. Sisters
    e. Fictive kin
2. Where did you grow up?
3. In some ways how are you similar to you father? Mother?
4. …how are you different?
5. How would you describe your relationship to your parents growing up?
    a. What was it like?
    b. What qualities did you like about your mom? Dad?
    c. What qualities were most challenging to you? what one thing about your parents did you find most confusing or difficult to understand?
6. What are some things you did as a teen your parents never learned about?
7. What do you most wish you'd learn from your mother/father?
8. Do you remember any specific messages that were communicated to you about being a male/female?
    a. What does it mean to you to be male/female (opposite sex)?

Current Relationship

1. What are some things that you do to reestablish your affection for one another? Your commitment? Relationship bond?
   a. How often?
2. What parts of your relationship need to come alive? Underdeveloped?
3. Please talk to me about something your partner does that makes you:
   a. Happy
      i. How do you communicate that?
      ii. Partner: how do you respond?
   b. Upset/angry
   c. Feel loved
   d. Appreciated
   e. Secure
   f. Heard
   g. Ignored
   h. Disappointed
4. Please tell me something your partner does that reminds you of your parent:
   a. Mother
   b. Father

Perceived Challenges

1. Tell me about some challenges in your dating/romantic relationship?
2. How did you handle those challenges? What did your partner do to handle those challenges?
3. When you experience conflict with your partner, what happens?
   a. How did you attempt to resolve/reconcile differences. What did your partner do to help resolve the conflict? Did the conflict get resolved for you? How about your partner?

Commitment Levels

1. When you hear the word, commitment, what comes to mind?
   a. Talk to me about short-term commitment? Long-term commitment?
   b. How do you address potential differences in commitment levels?
   c. Please talk to me about how you know a relationship is worthy of long-term commitment?

Strengths and Healthy Aspects of Relationships

2. What are some strengths and healthy aspects of your relationship?
    a. How do you safeguard that aspect?
    b. What do you do together to allow it to grow?

Personal and Collective Wisdom from Relationship Lessons

3. What advice would you give to other couples out there from your experience as a couple?