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## African American Men and Marriage: The Influence of Attitudes and Life Events

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**Abstract**

Marriage rates among African Americans are the lowest of any racial or ethnic group in the United States. In light of research suggesting that married adults and their children have better educational, financial, social, and emotional outcomes than divorced or never married adults and their children, policymakers have endorsed initiatives aimed at improving relationships and increasing marriage rates among African Americans. To this end, this study examined the factors associated with African American men's attitudes toward marriage, as well as the circumstances and experiences that helped shape their attitudes. Utilizing a mixed methods approach, survey and in-depth interview data were collected from a diverse sample of African American men. Quantitative results revealed that men's report of religiosity, current relationship status, parents' family structure, and not having a fear of intimacy predicted more favorable attitudes toward marriage. The qualitative analyses corroborated the quantitative analyses, revealing that the participants' attitudes were influenced by their family of origin and that they viewed the church and the government as central figures in both the retreat from marriage and any viable initiatives aimed at increasing marriage rates among African Americans.

## **Introduction**

Family is the primary institution in society. In addition to the provision of material needs, the family also shapes its members through nurturance and socialization (Segal, Gerdes, & Steiner, 2007). Although the mainstream society prescribes a married, two-parent configuration, a large proportion of contemporary African American families represent “non-traditional” family structures. Specifically, African Americans have the lowest marriage rates in the United States (Cherlin, 1998; Dixon, 2009) and are more likely than any other group to get divorced after marrying (Taylor, 2002). In addition, recent reports estimate that close to 69% of all African American children are born to unmarried couples and that 80% will spend a sizeable portion of their childhood living away from their fathers (Aird, 2003; Currence & Johnson, 2003).

Explanations offered for the disparity in marriage rates between African Americans and other groups are both individual and structural. Individually, authors have cited the severe imbalance in the ratio of African American women to men (Rank & Davis, 1996), a shortage of “marriageable” or gainfully employed men (Harcknett & McLanahan, 2004; Wilson, 1987), and African American women’s reluctance to give up their autonomy to enter into the patriarchal institution of marriage (Hill, 2006). At the structural level, the mass incarceration of young African American males (Clayton & Moore, 2003), misguided public policies that require family disruption as an eligibility criterion (Leashore, 1981), and systems of oppression that discredit and marginalize African American identity (Pinderhughes, 2002) are also cited as contributing factors to the low rates of marriage among African Americans.

## **Literature Review**

Although there is much variability regarding the reasons for the relatively low marriage rates among African Americans, many comparative studies have found that the outcomes for unmarried families are consistently worse than those for married families (Emery, 1999). In relation to married women, never married or divorced women are at an increased risk for depression (Brown, 2000) and domestic violence (Wilson & Daly, 1999). Children from unmarried families also tend to fare worse than children from married families. Specifically, children of unmarried parents are less likely to become college graduates (D'Onofrio, 2006) and more likely to experience poverty (Wilson, 2003), health problems (Angel & Worobey, 1988), involvement in criminal behavior (Harper & McLanahan, 2004), and suicide (Ross & Mirowsky, 1999). Moreover, children from unmarried families are more likely than children from married families to become divorced or single parents as adults (Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2000; Wolfinger, 2005).

In response to the negative outcomes associated with unmarried families, many social scientists and policymakers have endorsed legislative and programmatic initiatives aimed at improving relationships and increasing marriage rates among African American men and women. The promotion of the "healthy marriage movement" is largely based on research that describes the benefits of marriage for families (Blackman, Clayton, Glenn, Malone-Colon, & Roberts, 2005). The findings of several studies have found that marriage is associated with higher educational attainment, consistent involvement in the labor market, and higher incomes for men (Gray & Vanderhart, 2000) as well as better health and longer life expectancies for men and women (Lillard & Waite, 1995). For children, having married parents is associated with increased levels of paternal involvement (Schwartz & Finley, 2005) and high quality relationships with both mothers and fathers (Amato & Booth, 1997).

The increased interest in healthy African American marriages led to an increase in research to identify the protective and risk factors of high quality marital relationships. Recent studies investigating healthy African American marriages have revealed that successful marriages are those that involve men and women who are committed to being married, religious, trusting (Marks, Hopkins, Chaney, Monroe, Nesteruk, & Sasser, 2008), egalitarian (Davis, Williams, Emerson, & Hourd-Bryant, 2000), older and economically advantaged (Broman, 2005). Contrarily, unsuccessful African American marriages are characterized by infidelity (National Fatherhood Initiative, 2005), high levels of conflict, economic insecurity, and work related stress (Marks, Nesteruk, Hopkins-Williams, Swanson, & Davis, 2006). Research has also revealed that despite reports of low marital satisfaction (Davis et. al., 2000; McLoyd, Cauce, Takeuchi, & Wilson, 2000) many African American women still desire to get married (Franklin, 1997, Harris & Domenico, 2008). However, there is only scant literature on African American men's attitudes regarding marriage. This gap in the literature is significant in light of reports that for many African American men, their initial perceptions and expectations of romantic relationships are predictive of the relationship's subsequent success or failure (Clarkwest, 2006; Clarkwest, 2007). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to fill this gap in the literature and to build knowledge that may be instructive to policymakers, practitioners, and educators interested in promoting marriage by answering the following research questions:

1. What are the factors associated with African American men's attitudes towards marriage?
2. In what ways do African American men's life experiences shape their attitudes toward marriage?

## Methods

### Design

This study employed a mixed methods design. These designs are useful in that they allow for triangulation (Royse, Thyer, Padgett, & Logan, 2001). In other words, the findings and interpretations of the quantitative data can be strengthened and corroborated by the findings in the qualitative data. In this study, the quantitative data were collected using a cross sectional survey design, and the qualitative data were collected using a phenomenological method.

### Sample

The sample for the quantitative component of this study included 161 adult, African American males. On average, these men were 37.67 ( $SD = 16.98$ ) years old, earned \$38,154.71 ( $SD = 38,815.55$ ) annually, and had 1.40 ( $SD = 1.96$ ) biological children. In their adult lives, the men reported having had on average 6.80 ( $SD = 7.01$ ) girlfriends with these relationships lasting an average of 15.69 ( $SD = 11.29$ ) months. Sixteen (9.9%) of the men held neither a GED/high school diploma nor a college degree; 83 (51.6%) held at least a GED/high school diploma; and 62 (38.5%) both a GED/high school diploma and a college degree. Seventy-four (46.0%) were married; 6 (3.7%) were not married, but were cohabitating with their girlfriend; 45 (28.0%) were dating, but were not cohabitating with their girlfriend; and 36 (22.4%) were not romantically involved with anyone. The sample for the qualitative component of this study included 33 of the adult, African American men who completed the quantitative component of the study. On average, this subset of the full sample was 41.03 ( $SD = 15.76$ ) years old, they had 2.03 ( $SD = 2.14$ ) children, and 15 (45.5%) were married, 10 (30.3%) were divorced, and 8 (24.2%) were single and had never been married. Tables 1 and 2 display the frequency distributions and descriptive statistics for all of the outcome and predictor variables in the full sample.

## **Measures**

### **Marriage Attitudes**

The primary outcome variable, attitudes toward marriage, was measured using a scale developed to measure marriage attitudes in the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study (Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, 2004). This scale has 6 items (e.g. “All in all, there are more advantages to being single than to being married”) measured on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree. The scale yielded an internal consistency score of .71 with the current sample.

### **Authoritarianism**

Authoritarianism was measured using the Authoritarianism Scale-short form (Heaven, 1985). This scale is designed to measure authoritarian personality traits. This scale has 20 items (e.g., “Do you tend to be the one who makes the decisions at home?”) measured on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = almost never to 5 = almost always. The Authoritarianism Scale has a reported internal consistency of .79. The scale yielded an internal consistency score of .83 with the current sample.

### **Relationship with Father**

The quality of the men’s relationships with their fathers was measured using the Parent-Child Relationship Survey (Fine & Schwebel, 1983). This scale is designed to measure the quality of the parent-child relationship. The full scale has 24 items, but only the Father Involvement subscale was used in this study. The Father Involvement subscale contains 6 items (e.g., “How much time do you spend with your father?”) measured on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = none or not at all to 7 = a great deal. The Father Involvement subscale has a reported



internal consistency score of .89. The scale yielded an internal consistency score of .81 with the current sample.

### **Relationship/Marriage Alternatives**

Relationship or marriage alternatives were measured using the Marital Alternatives Scale (Udry, 1981). This scale was designed to measure how much better or worse off a person would be without his or her present partner and how easily the current partner could be replaced. This scale has 11 items (e.g., “You could get another woman as good as she is?”) measured on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 = impossible to 4 = certain. The Marital Alternatives Scale has a reported internal consistency score of .70. The scale yielded an internal consistency score of .72 with the current sample.

### **Relationship Plans**

Relationship plans was measured using the Kansas Marital Goals Orientation Scale (Eggeman, Moxley, & Schumm, 1985). This scale was designed to measure a couples' intentionality with regard to improving their relationship. The scale has 7 items (e.g., “How often do you and your partner discuss the way you would like your relationship to be five years from now?”) measured on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = almost never to 5 = almost always. The Kansas Marital Goals Orientation Scale has a reported internal consistency score of .94. The scale yielded an internal consistency score of .92 with the current sample.

### **Family Cohesion**

Family Cohesion was measured using the Self-report Family Instrument (Beavers, Hampson, & Hulgus, 1985). This scale was designed to measure several dimensions of family functioning. The scale has 36 items (e.g., “Our family would rather do things together than with

other people.”) measured on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = fits our family well to 5 = does not fit our family. The Self-report Family Instrument has a reported internal consistency score of .85. The scale yielded an internal consistency score of .75 with the current sample.

### **Attitude toward Children**

Attitude toward children was measured using the Barnett Liking of Children Scale (Barnett & Sinisi, 1990). This scale was designed to measure attitudes about children and childrearing. The scale has 14 items (e.g., “I like children.”) measured on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 strongly agree. The Barnett Liking of Children Scale has a reported internal consistency score of .93. The scale yielded an internal consistency score of .82 with the current sample.

### **Fear of Intimacy**

Fear of intimacy was measured using the Fear of Intimacy Scale (Descutner & Thelen, 1991). This scale was designed to measure individual’s fear of intimacy. The scale has 35 items (e.g., “I have held back my feelings in previous relationships”) measured on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = not at all characteristic of me to 5 = extremely characteristic of me. The Fear of Intimacy Scale has a reported internal consistency score of .93. The scale yielded an internal consistency score of .81 with the current sample.

### **Religiosity**

Religiosity was measured using the Religiosity Measure (Rohrbaugh & Jessor, 1975). This scale was designed to measure the impact of religion on a person’s daily life. The scale has 8 items (e.g., “When you have a serious problem, how often do you take religious advice or teachings into consideration?”) measured on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 = almost never to 4 =

almost always. The Religiosity Measure has a reported internal consistency score of .90. The scale yielded an internal consistency score of .86 with the current sample.

### **Procedures**

In an attempt to recruit a diverse cross section of African American, adult males, potential participants were recruited from a local university, social service agencies, barbershops, and philanthropic organizations. Included in participants' study packets were informed consent forms, quantitative surveys, and pre-addressed envelopes with return postage. Upon completion and return of the 20-minute survey questionnaires, participants were instructed to indicate whether or not they were interested in participating in the face-to-face qualitative interview. For those not interested in completing the qualitative interview, returning the survey questionnaire marked the end of their participation in the study. Those who were interested in participating in the qualitative interview indicated their interest by providing their contact information. Upon return of the survey questionnaire, those expressing interest in the qualitative interviews were contacted to schedule the interviews at a date, time, and location of the participant's choosing. On average, the semi-structured interviews lasted 42 minutes and queried participants with regard to their attitudes toward marriage and the experiences that shaped those attitudes. All interviews were digitally audio recorded and transcribed by the principal investigator.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis for this study consisted of two stages. The first stage involved the quantitative data analysis and the second stage involved the qualitative data analysis. With regard to the quantitative data, preliminary analyses consisted of reporting descriptive statistics for the outcome variable and each of the predictor variables. Beyond the descriptive statistics, bivariate analyses included a series of analysis of variance (ANOVA) comparing the attitudes

towards marriage among African American, adult males of various ages, incomes, relationship statuses, and family backgrounds. The multivariate analysis included a multiple regression analysis used to determine the strongest predictors of African American adult males' attitudes towards marriage.

The second stage of data analysis involved qualitative data analysis. These data were collected via semi-structured, in-depth interviews utilizing a phenomenological method. Consistent with the tenets of this method, the interviews were transcribed and the text were coded for emerging themes and subsequently grouped into meaning units that led to an overall description of the participants' attitudes toward marriage and the significant life events and experiences that shaped those attitudes. QSR International's NVIVO 8 (QSR International, 2008) was used to assist in data analysis. With regard to interpreting the data, per the guidelines of Creswell (1998), the participants' experiences and epiphanies were highlighted along with the contexts in which they occurred to present the patterns, processes, and unique features of their lives.

## **Results**

### **Quantitative Data Analysis**

The first analysis of variance revealed that the effect of age was statistically significant,  $F(2, 158) = 20.850, p = .000$ . Post hoc analyses using the Bonferroni correction for significance indicated that men ages 0-25 ( $M = 16.97, SD = 2.37$ ) held attitudes toward marriage that were significantly less favorable than men ages 26-39 ( $M = 18.82, SD = 2.28$ ) and men ages 40 and up ( $M = 19.51, SD = 1.97$ ). These differences yielded moderate ( $\eta^2 = .75$ ) and large ( $\eta^2 = 1.03$ ) effect sizes, respectively.

The second analysis of variance revealed that the effect of income was statistically significant,  $F(2, 152) = 12.944, p = .000$ . Post hoc analyses using the Bonferroni correction for significance indicated that men earning 0- \$24,999 ( $M = 17.49, SD = 2.78$ ) held attitudes toward marriage that were significantly less favorable than men earning \$25,000-49,999 ( $M = 18.76, SD = 1.84$ ) and men earning \$50,000 and up ( $M = 19.60, SD = 1.71$ ). These differences yielded moderate ( $\eta^2 = .52$ ) and large ( $\eta^2 = .87$ ) effect sizes respectively.

The third analysis of variance revealed that the effect of the men's relationship/family structure was significant  $F(2, 158) = 25.750, p = .000$ . Post hoc analyses using the Bonferroni correction for significance indicated that married men ( $M = 19.80, SD = 1.95$ ) held attitudes toward marriage that were significantly more favorable than men who were only dating ( $M = 17.54, SD = 2.17$ ) and men who were not romantically involved with anyone ( $M = 17.12, SD = 2.43$ ). These differences yielded large effect sizes of ( $\eta^2 = .92$ ) and ( $\eta^2 = 1.09$ ), respectively.

The fourth analysis of variance revealed that the effect of the men's parents' relationship/family structure was significant  $F(2, 156) = 12.931, p = .000$ . Post hoc analyses using the Bonferroni correction for significance indicated that men with parents who never married each other and were not romantically involved with each other ( $M = 16.97, SD = 2.29$ ) held attitudes toward marriage that were significantly less favorable than men whose parents were married ( $M = 19.18, SD = 2.17$ ) and men whose parents were divorced from each other ( $M = 18.31, SD = 2.44$ ). These differences yielded large ( $\eta^2 = .91$ ) and moderate ( $\eta^2 = .55$ ), respectively.

With regard to the multivariate analysis, multiple regression analysis was used to determine the significant predictors of African American, adult males' attitudes toward marriage.

The results of the regression indicated that the predictors in the model explained 44 percent of the variance. Further, the analysis revealed that higher levels of religiosity ( $\beta = .342, p = .000$ ), being involved in a more traditional relationship/family structure ( $\beta = -.234, p = .010$ ), being less fearful of intimacy ( $\beta = -.180, p = .013$ ), and having parents who are involved in a more traditional relationship/family structure with each other ( $\beta = -.152, p = .050$ ) significantly predicted favorable attitudes toward marriage. Table 3 displays the coefficients and statistics for the remaining variables included in the model.

### **Qualitative Data Analysis**

The qualitative data for this study consisted of 33 in-depth face-to-face interviews. These interviews yielded 23.12 hours of digital audio records and 211 pages of text transcripts. Although the interviews were very comprehensive and rich, there were a few predominant themes that emerged from the data, including the characteristics that men saw in potential marriage mates, the influence of their families of origin (especially fathers) in shaping their attitudes, and the roles of the church and the government in promoting marriage.

### **“Marriage Material”**

Regardless of their marital status, several of the men expressed their thoughts about the traits or characteristics that would make a woman an ideal marriage mate. While the single men discussed these traits from a “wish list” perspective, many of the men who were currently married or had been married in the past talked about these traits in the context of the things that made their wives “stand out” from the crowd. Some of the characteristics discussed were having an open mind, which entailed being receptive to learning about different cultures, experiences, and ways of practicing one’s spirituality. The men described how sharing in these types of

activities were the things that did or could potentially bring them closer to their partners.

Attractive marriage mates were also described as being honest, trustworthy, reliable, and consistent.

Strength and shared values were two other characteristics that were mentioned frequently. According to the participants, having a “strong woman” manifested itself in many different ways. To some, a woman’s strength was connected to her ability to raise children appropriately, while others emphasized intelligence and the ability to engage in discourse related to current events as strength. However, most often, strength was exemplified in women who could not only maintain their financial independence, but could also serve as a support system for their partners, while simultaneously inspiring them and holding them accountable for becoming better men, husbands, and fathers. According to a 29-year, married, unemployed father of three:

“Just um, like I said, the supportiveness. The fact that even though I’m flawed as all men are, nobody is perfect, but.... [sighs and pauses] she looked passed all that. She saw me for who I was and who I’m capable of being. And she’s given me her love, we don’t have no trust issues. And times that I’ve been down, she’s picked me up. So for me, that was major! That’s hard to find these days, you know. She was a diamond in the rough.”

Shared values was also high on the men’s list of marriage mate traits and characteristics. Many of the married men spoke about how easy it was to get to know the women who became their wives when they shared common values regarding religion and spirituality, childrearing, and family. As one man stated:

“When I met her and uh... I liked her. I liked that she had some drive and that she was very intelligent. I saw that she was trying to make a life for herself and you know, she

wanted some things. We kind of..., well our checklists kind of matched up. So we got together and got along really well, so I said I'll try to keep this one if she'll let me."

### **"Family of Origin"**

There was general consensus related to the ways in which the men's family of origin influenced their attitudes toward marriage. In fact, when asked about the largest influence on their attitude toward marriage, 28 of the 33 men cited experiences in their immediate or extended family. The men discussed a wide range of experiences that they encountered as children and as adults that helped shape their opinions of marriage and have also influenced their behavior within their relationships. Some of the men's experiences encouraged marriage, while others' experiences served as cautionary tales and deterred marriage. A 22-year-old man who was considering proposing to his girlfriend mentioned:

"It depends on where you look at it from. For me, I'm young, I know I want kids, I know who I want to marry. It's like.... My grandparents have been together before since, like since before I could remember. I have an auntie and uncle that have been together since the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. You know, and I'm like I want that. You know when you meet people like that, when you look at the way society was [in previous generations], people weren't divorcing back then. They were making it work. They were staying together. And so it was like, not necessarily pressure from society, but it was just the way it was. But when there is a certain standard by which it's so entrenched in your family that you don't know any other way, then that's just how it is. I wish we could get back to that."

This excerpt speaks to the importance of having positive models of marriage for African American males, an issue that came up repeatedly in the interviews. Another young man who



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was married, spoke in clear detail about how watching his own father's behavior provided him with guidelines, established a standard, and set clear expectations for how men should stand by their partners and honor their commitments in marriage:

“...Like I said, the way my father treated my mother [who subsequently died from cancer]. Especially as I got older and the more sick she got. Even though I was a knucklehead and we didn't get along, he always took care of us. I mean, we didn't have the best personal relationship, even to this day. But you know, to see him work 10 hour days, come home, you know, and take care of his kids. As far as feeding us and making sure our homework is done. Making sure we got out the door to catch the bus. Making sure my mom made all her chemo[therapy] treatments and any type of rehab. You know, she got to a point where the cancer had got into her bones so she had to sleep in a.... you know, a hospital type issued bed and, you know, he had to sleep on the floor. He couldn't sleep in the bed with her, you know. He had to bathe her. Um..., there was a point that he had to feed her. Man, she couldn't even go to the restroom without him. So to me, that was like the epitome of love.”

Unfortunately, not all of the men had such powerful examples to follow. In these cases, according to many of the men who were interviewed, young men are in many ways lost and confused about the purpose, structure, and function of marriage.

“If you're a young man, if you don't see or hear about marriage, a husband and a wife....what is marriage? It becomes whatever you see on TV or maybe what somebody told you. How often do you get to see a husband and wife interact? You see what I'm

saying? I'm talkin' about expectations. I've always been a proponent of expectations. You gotta teach expectations!"

For others, not having a model for marriage may have been a welcomed change. For these men, it was the model that they were exposed to that was the source of their ambiguity, hesitation, and reluctance to embrace marriage. These feelings were best expressed by a 27-year-old man who admitted being anxious about the seeming inevitability of marriage:

"People of color often don't see marriage modeled well. My mother has been divorced three times. So... there is a part of me that is like...[uncomfortable laugh] I don't know about getting married. I look at it like, if she can't do it and she is the one who raised me, then... then it's clear that whatever needed to be poured in men wasn't done by her so how am I going to be successful at this?"

### **"Church, State, and Marriage"**

After discussing the state of marriage among African Americans and describing the events and experiences that shaped their personal attitudes about marriage, the men were asked if they perceived increasing marriage rates among African Americans as a worthwhile goal and if so, what were their thoughts relative to how this either should or could be done. In response, an overwhelming majority (32 of the 33 men) agreed that increasing marriage rates was a worthwhile goal. The one man who disagreed stated that "marriage isn't for everyone." For those who perceived increasing marriage rates among African Americans as a worthwhile goal, the rationales were mostly related to the fact that the men saw healthy marriage as synonymous with stability. Specifically, the men stated that too many African American families are missing strong fathers serving as the heads of their households. According to this these men, the best

way to “re-install” fathers as the heads of their households is to increase marriage rates and reduce the number of African Americans who divorce. Others mentioned, “Marriage equals strong families, and strong families mean strong communities.” A 60-year-old married father of three adult children went as far as to say, “A man can’t be respectable and should not be able to hold public office unless he is married.”

Despite the general agreement that something should be done to increase marriage rates among African Americans, there was less agreement as to who or what should take on that responsibility. Several men stated that they did not think it was the role of government to encourage or promote marriage citing the separation between church and state. Other men thought that it was very appropriate for the government to get involved in promoting marriage to African Americans. In fact, in the views of some of the men, it was the government that had a hand in splitting up many African American families via public assistance policies that required that fathers be non-resident as a condition for eligibility. In their view, it was the government’s obligation to repair what it had helped to destroy. According to a 72-year-old attorney:

“There is something wrong when you have to do something bad to get help... We’ve got to start rewarding good behavior. You know, incentivize families. Even with Section 8, if you could give priority to husbands and wives, you’re strengthening something that is good. You’ve gotta reward marriage and we don’t do that.”

The other institution that was identified as an ideal body to encourage marriage among African Americans was the church. None of the men expressed any disagreement with the church promoting marriage. The majority of the men stated that they would like to see the church become more aggressive in its marketing of marriage. Said one man, “You have to sell it.

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You have to market it so that people will buy into it.” Evidence of the church’s need to become more active in promoting marriage was the changes in African American family structure. Many of the older men lamented what they viewed as a generational divide with regard to the increasing acceptance of non-traditional family structure in contemporary society.

“Certain things are more socially acceptable these days. The single Black mother is praised these days, and the single Black father is damn near the Ebony [magazine] man of the month. Marriage is no longer the end all, be all. A lot of people have that mindset.”

When asked their thoughts about the specific ways that the church could get more involved in the promotion of marriage, the men mentioned that many churches have couples’ ministries and that these are ideal for providing congregations and communities with images and models of strong, healthy marriages. Several of the men highlighted the importance of the church partnering with community partners to do outreach on the benefits of marriage, as well as providing relationship education. According to a 21-year-old single man, “I feel like that should be a part of the church curriculum. You know, teaching young men and women how to coexist in a relationship, be in love, and how to treat each other.” In describing his attempt to cultivate one such partnership, a 53-year-old pastor stated:

“The church should have ongoing retreats and workshops for singles and married folks. Even in our youth programs in the church, we are confronting issues such as sexual abuse, date rape and moving beyond the past because these things happen and people bring them into their relationships. I tell ya..., one of the things that our church does is we have to talk about sex and what a responsible relationship is. Then for our young adults, we have to create an environment for them, especially the singles where they can

have time to fellowship together without the pressure to 'date.' This helps because they learn to become friends first.”

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to fill a gap in the literature by examining African American men's attitudes toward marriage and exploring the ways in which the men's life experiences shaped their attitudes. This is an important area of inquiry given the relatively low rates of marriage among African Americans (African American Healthy Marriage Initiative, 2003), the reported benefits for children and families associated with marriage (Bulanda, 2010), and the fact that many African American women desire to marry, provided they can find a willing (i.e. favorable attitude) and able (i.e. marriageable) partner (England & Edin, 2007). The bivariate analyses revealed that younger, more economically disadvantaged men who are not married and whose parents were never married to each other held significantly less favorable views toward marriage than their counterparts who were older, more well off financially, were married themselves, and had parents who were married to each other. These findings were expected given that previous research had found that younger men who are often less economically viable tend to marry less often than their men who are older and have higher incomes (Broman, 2005; Edin, 2000). This occurs as both men and women tend to associate a man's ability to provide financially for a family with his attractiveness as a potential marriage mate. The findings that married men and men whose parents were married held more favorable views toward marriage were also expected. As corroborated by the qualitative analyses, having tangible role models who have “been there and done that” provide men with a level of confidence and security that they too can be successful at marriage.

In the multivariate analysis, when examined in the context of other intrapersonal, interpersonal, and external factors, the impact of men's age and income was decreased as higher levels of religiosity, less fear of intimacy, their own marital status, and that of their parents significantly predicted more favorable views toward marriage. Given the findings from the bivariate analyses, the question became what might explain the reduced impact of age and income in the presence of the other factors? First, starting with the strongest predictor, reporting high levels of religiosity seems to go hand in hand with more favorable attitudes toward marriage. As one might imagine, the church's preference for traditional family structure featuring male-headed households (Billingsley, 1992; Tinney, 1981) is consistent with the participants' favorable marriage attitudes. Further, men who are more religiously inclined would also be more apt to view marriage as normative and as an expected and natural progression of a positive romantic relationship. Or, in the words of a 60-year-old community center director, "In my mind, I treated all my dates as though they were interviews for the position of husband and soul mate." Second, men who had less of a fear of intimacy were associated with holding more favorable attitudes toward marriage. This can be easily understood considering the emphasis that the men placed on having a mate that was both strong and supportive to as one put it, "pick me up when I am down." The level of vulnerability expressed in this statement suggests that not only did those who viewed marriage favorably not fear intimacy, but rather they sought it out and expected from their partners. This is in stark contrast to reports of African American men who employ the "cool pose" in an attempt to keep from exposing their genuine feelings for fear that they might be rejected. Third, men whose parents were involved in more traditional relationships and family structures were also associated with more favorable attitudes toward marriage. This finding is consistent with research suggesting that marriage has intergenerational

effects for many (Wallerstein et al., 2000). As corroborated by the qualitative data, having parents who are married provided several of the men with tangible examples of what a successful marriage looks like and established a standard for the men to strive for. Finally, men who were themselves married were associated with holding more favorable views toward marriage. It was certainly expected that men who had already decided to marry would hold favorable attitudes toward the institution of marriage. It was also expected that in light of media and social science reports of African American marriage that often come from a deficit perspective highlighting the low rates of commitment and marital satisfaction (Broman, 2005), those who were not married would not view it favorably. This very sentiment was expressed by one of the participants who told a story of a friend's wedding in which men turned and ran away in an attempt to not be touched by the bride's garter (a symbolic custom at many weddings that is said to indicate that marriage is on the horizon for the man who catches it).

In sum, the themes that emerged from the qualitative analyses not only served to strengthen and corroborate the findings in the quantitative analyses, they also spoke to the men's desires to develop, contribute to, and live in contexts where marriage was encouraged, expected, and respected. According to these men, increasing marriage rates was one of, if not the best ways to strengthen African American families and communities. Beyond expressing their support for interventions by the church and to a lesser extent, the government, these men also acknowledged the utility of having strong healthy relationships and marriages in their own families so that the younger generations, as well as they themselves could benefit from those couples' wisdom, experience and perspective. Moreover, despite the contention by some that marriage promotion (Coltrane, 2001) is a slippery slope that masks a hidden agenda driven by conservatism, patriarchy, and promoting marriage at all costs, in many ways, the men in this

study did not conceptualize marriage as an arrangement that favored them as dominant and relegated their wives and girlfriends as second-class subordinates. Rather, these men conceptualized marriage as a way to honor and edify their partners. Or, in the words of a 50-year-married father:

“...The best example I can give is... Man, put it like this. She gives me the desire to carry myself with integrity even outside of her presence because she’s just that real and it gives me the desire to cherish her and I never got that from any other woman.”

### **Limitations**

This study has some limitations that should be considered when examining the results. First, the cross sectional design only provides a “snapshot” view of the participants’ experiences and does not measure them over time. Therefore, changes in the participants’ attitudes based on new experiences and circumstances were not captured. Second, the non-probability sampling strategy does not allow for generalizations of the findings to the population of African American men. It is also possible that this study was susceptible to bias in that those with extraordinarily positive or negative attitudes about marriage may have been more likely to self-select into the study. Finally, the reliance on participant self report was a limitation in that it increases the likelihood of participants providing socially desirable responses, particularly given that African American men are often criticized and blamed in the media, popular culture, and social science for the low rates of marriage among African Americans.

### **Implications**

Despite its limitations, the findings from this study have implications for those concerned with increasing marriage rates among African Americans. For policymakers, the findings from this study suggest that there may be ways to encourage and promote marriage that move beyond



the usual recommendations related to allocating funds for programs and services that will increase men's economic viability as a way to make them more attractive in the marriage pool. This is not to minimize the importance of economics in discussions and initiatives dedicated to marriage and family structure because as Edin and Kefalas (2005) remind us, gone are the days when people are satisfied with being "poor and happily married." However, these findings do provide support for the notion that while economic stability is important, when viewed in the context of other factors, it is not the only factor in determining whether one is favorable toward marriage. Therefore, in addition to improving men's economic stability, exposing them to successfully married couples may also be beneficial, particularly for the couples' relatives and children.

These findings also point to the central role that the church plays in the lives of many African Americans, including African American men. Despite the fact that African American male church attendance is down from years past (Chatters, Lincoln, & Taylor, 1999; Levin & Taylor, 1999), the men in this study not only expressed a willingness to participate in church related activities and events to promote and encourage marriage, but they also expressed an interest in helping the church do outreach work and engage the local community in conversations about marriage. Given this finding, churches and faith-based organizations may continue to be important community partners, clearinghouses, and referral agencies for secular relationship education interventions.

Finally, and maybe most importantly, the findings of this study have implications for the media and popular culture. Oftentimes, in the media and popular culture, the images of African American men in families are portrayed as either buffoons in need of supervision and monitoring or "playas" who are only concerned with themselves and exploit others for their own

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gratification. Although it is not the first, nor will not be the last example that refutes this false dichotomy, this study gives voice to a diverse group of thoughtful, civically oriented African American men, a group that often stands accused in the discourse related to family structure and well-being, but is very rarely allowed to testify in its own defense.

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Table 1

*Sample Frequency Distributions*

	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
<b>Education</b>		
GED/high school diploma and college degree	62	38.5
GED/high school diploma only	83	51.6
No GED/high school diploma or college degree	16	9.9
<b>Relationship/family structure</b>		
Married	74	46.0
Not married, but cohabitating with girlfriend	6	3.7
Dating, but not cohabitating with girlfriend	45	28.0
Not involved in any relationship	36	22.4
<b>Parents' relationship/family structure</b>		
Married to each other	83	51.6
Not married, but cohabitating with each other	2	1.2
Divorced	34	21.1
Never married and not currently involved	40	24.8

Table 2

*Sample Descriptive Statistics*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Age	37.67	16.98
Income	38,154.71	38,815.55
Biological children	1.40	1.96
Past girlfriends	6.80	7.01
Average length of relationships (months)	15.69	11.29
Relationship alternatives	29.39	5.39
Authoritarianism	36.86	5.59
Relationship/marital planning	21.08	6.95
Family cohesion	27.18	3.93
Attitude toward children	52.47	10.00
Fear of intimacy	14.13	4.62
Religiosity	15.36	3.86
Relationship with father	24.94	10.18
Marriage attitude	18.47	2.45

Table 3

*Multiple Regression Model for Attitudes toward Marriage*

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>β</i>
Income	8.075	.000	.120
Age	.009	.014	.060
Education	.307	.290	.080
Relationship/family structure	-.456	.195	-.234**
Parents' relationship/family structure	-.285	.145	-.152*
Religiosity	.269	.056	.342***
Authoritarianism	.016	.035	.030
Family cohesion	.077	.055	.099
Attitude toward children	-.042	.022	-.137
Relationship with father	-.014	.023	-.045
Relationship alternatives	-.050	.043	-.075
Relationship planning	-.029	.036	-.056
Fear of intimacy	-.119	.047	-.180**
Constant	18.032	2.612	

Note. \* $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$  \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = 44.0\%$