

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Problem And Setting

The concept of marriage is dominating the headlines in many of America's popular magazines and newspapers. From the President's initiative on marriage to the current focus on the legality of gay marriages, many are questioning the role of marriage in our society today. In a recent cover story, Business Week (2003) calls "Unmarried" the new American way. According to the Center for Disease Control (1995) the marriage rate in the U.S. dropped to 9.0 marriages per 1,000 population in 1993, the lowest rate in 30 years. A number of factors are often used to explain the growing numbers of unmarried adults in our population including high divorce rates, delaying marriage, and growing acceptance of cohabitation. Current data from the Bureau of Census shows a continual decline in marriage rates. In their Current Population Reports (2001) they write, "Since 1970, the composition of households and families and the marital status and living arrangements of adults in the United States both experience marked changes. For example, the proportion of single mothers increased, while the median age at first marriage grew over time." In Fighting for Your Marriage, Markham, Stanley and Blumberg (2001) write that in response to the fact that almost half of all marriages fail, "...more people are thinking that the pain of divorce can be prevented by avoiding what leads to divorce: marriage" (p.11).

For African American families the changes in marital patterns in this country over time are more dramatic than for White families. Only 25% of Black

women are married by their twenties (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995) and in 1998, the percentage of African American women who had never married stood at 41% compared to 22% of White women (Besharov & West, 2001).

Nancy Boyd Franklin (2003) writes that many African American women are pessimistic about their chances of marrying, particularly when members of their families have been unable to model lasting relationships. She writes, “The despair of some African American women that they may never find viable marriage partners has led them to have children alone, with a consequent increase in the number of single-parent Black families” (p. 96). Staples (1993) suggests that African Americans still desire to be in a nuclear family but conditions that foster that desire have altered significantly. He points to the shortage of Black men and the higher educational attainment of Black women as two conditions that have contributed to the declining rates of marriage in the African American community.

In observing my own daughter and daughters of my friends, I wondered why they seemed to be more interested in their careers and their independence than in getting married. When I came across the figures showing the increase in African American women who have never married, I became intrigued with finding out why these young women are remaining single. This trend, if it continues, has the potential to change the nature of all families in our culture.

In the past, marriage has been considered the cornerstone of building nurturing families and viable communities. What then is the impact of the decline in marriage? Are we headed “down the slippery slope” as the Business Week

article characterized it, or are we in need of a re-examination of what constitutes a “family”? Some articles caution us not to romanticize the so-called nuclear family. For example, Stephanie Coontz (1995) writes that America needs to do more than just aspire to the Ozzie and Harriet concept of marriage. “We need to build values and social institutions that can reconcile people’s needs for independence with their equally important rights to dependence...” (p. 11).

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to understand how Young High Functioning (YHF) African American women perceive marriage and their thoughts about remaining single. I attempt to understand whether or not these YHF African American women desire to be married, how they view their single status, and what factors seem to contribute to their remaining single.

Because so much of the research on African American families is policy driven, much is written about low-income families (Blake & Darling, 2000; Hill, 1993). It is important to also acknowledge the large and growing middle-class population in the African American community and how the decline in marriage impacts that segment of the community. For this reason, I chose to study only YHF African American Women. I define these women as those who are ages 25 - 35, who have at least a bachelor’s degree, and make at least \$35,000 per year. I believe this is an important population in the African American community that is rarely studied. The middle class can serve as important role models for those in the lower economic classes and there is merit in having a better understanding of middle class African American families. In addition, beginning to understand

how these YHF African American women make a decision to marry or remain single will contribute to beginning to understand the declining marital rates of all African Americans.

Significance

As marriage and family therapists, we should be knowledgeable about changes in family patterns as well as changes in the family value systems of our clients. In a recent article, the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy Board of Directors announced their intention to appoint a Task Force on Relationship, Health and Marriage (Family Therapy, January/February 2004).

They stated:

We do hold a value system about relationships. As marriage and family therapists, and as an association, we believe that relationships are fundamental to the health and well being of individuals, families, and communities. We believe that individuals and communities best thrive when relationships are emotionally positive, stable, and reflect long-term attachment (p. 12).

The family is the smallest unit in society and the foundation for a community. Family life is tied to the welfare of a community. "Having offspring is wonderfully conducive to making people concerned about schools, public parks, and youth facilities. Children can lead backsliding parents to resume attendance at church or synagogue as well as to begin service in programs for the younger generation" (Aldous, 1990).

As a researcher, I am particularly concerned about how changes in marital patterns potentially impact life in the African American community. Our community already has a high number of children living in single-parent homes. In 2000, less than one half of Black families were married couple households (U.S. Census Bureau). In light of the changing structure of all families in our country, it is important to understand how we can provide the nurture and support needed by family members in the context of changing family patterns.

Understanding how declining rates of marriage might change the structure of the African American family is important to the marriage and family therapy community. I believe there is a need to take a closer look at the high rate of unmarrieds in the African American community to begin to understand how African American women perceive marriage and the factors that contribute to their remaining single.

Another area of interest is the quality of life for single women as they move through the life span. Studies often show that individuals in happy marriages are healthier than individuals who live alone and there is a societal expectation that marriage will be a supportive mechanism contributing to the well being of the individual (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1998).

Theoretical Framework

I have selected a feminist perspective as the theoretical framework for this study. As I will show in the literature review, throughout history, there has been tension between feminists and African American women. Bell Hooks (1994)

discusses her experience of introducing skeptical Black students to feminism. She writes:

Black students, female and male, continually integrate this issue. Whether in the classroom or while giving a public lecture, I am continually asked whether or not black concern with the struggle to end racism precludes involvement with feminist movement (p 112).

Many African American women consider feminism an issue for middle class white women. However, women of all ethnicities are faced with the challenge of living in a patriarchal society.

Feminism is an important framework for looking at marriage. For many dual-career couples, women are generally expected to assume the bulk of the traditional housework (Markman, Stanley & Blumberg 2001; Higgins, Dusbury & Lee, 1993). It seems reasonable that YHF African American women may not be willing to take a submissive role with a husband while also holding the role of an equal or even primary bread winner. These young women have grown up watching their mothers balance careers and family and they may not be as willing as their mothers to take responsibility for running a household and raising children while also working outside of the home.

Additionally, a feminist perspective allows me to give voice to YHF African American women through an ethnographic study. Through their own words and stories, I was able to allow them to speak without filter about their perceptions about marriage and remaining single.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

The dramatic increase in the number of African American women who are not married has captured the attention of a number of researchers. The purpose of the current study is to look at a small cohort of women to understand how they perceive marriage and their thoughts about remaining single. For my literature review, I will present some historical information on African American families, review research on why African American marriage patterns may differ from that of the majority society and review research regarding the feminist perspective, as this is the framework I have selected for this research. Finally, I discuss ethnographic studies and why I believe this to be a viable approach to looking at this issue.

Historical Perspectives of African American Families and Marriage

In an article on African American Marriage Patterns, marital patterns are contrasted between African American, Hispanic and White Women (Besharov & West, 2001). “Compared with white women, African-American women are 25 percent less likely ever to have been married and about half as likely to be currently married” (p. 95). The article uses 1998 Census Bureau data to provide the following information—29% of African American women aged fifteen and over were married compared to 55% of White women and 49% of Hispanic women. Additionally, the article presents the startling statistic that, “Between 1950 and 1998, the percentage of never married white women aged fifteen and over rose from 20 percent to 22 percent, a 10 percent rise. But the percentage of

never-married African American women doubled going from 21 percent to 41 percent” (p. 96).

African Americans have a long history of building families. According to M. Belinda Tucker and Claudia Mitchell-Kernan (1998), “The centrality of marriage in African American culture is perhaps most evident by its persistence in the face of extraordinarily hostile conditions, including efforts during slavery to prevent and to sever marital bonds. Despite these inhospitable circumstances, the 1890 Census showed that 88 percent of Black men and 92 percent of Black women age 35 to 44 were currently married or widowed” (p. 57). Our enslaved ancestors carried to America the African emphasis on community and interdependence and the concept of the extended family (Hilliard, 2002). Nancy Boyd-Franklin (2003) writes that Black people created the tradition of “jumping the broom” in order to acknowledge the union of a man and a woman. Through the 1950’s the rates of African American marriages and white marriages remained roughly the same (Besharov & West, 2001). However, it seems that the rates began to diverge at the same time civil rights and feminism began to open doors for minorities and women.

In the mid 1960’s the Moynihan Report (1965) was issued. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (who later became an influential senator) was serving in the Department of Labor at the time the report was written. Traci West (1999) writes:

The 1965 Moynihan Report remains one of the most influential documents shaping discussions about the black poor from the mid-twentieth century onward. Moynihan reported that the ‘matriarchal

structure' of the Negro family seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male, and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well. Because single moms head too many black families they are "pathological" and spell doom for the progress of the race (p. 135).

For many middle class African Americans in the late 60's and early 70's marriage was seen as a way to promote the image of a race tarnished by the Moynihan report. African American mothers wanted their daughters to find a "good husband." Some families saw college as a way to help them find a doctor, lawyer, or at least a postal employee with good benefits. What has happened in a generation to change the ratio of married to single women? Have middle class African Americans changed their perceptions of the value of marriage? Are Young High Functioning (YHF) African American women making conscious decisions to remain single, or are they just not finding the right mate? In an article that appeared in Essence Magazine, Beverly Guy-Shetfall is quoted as saying, "One of the things that gets lost in the discussion of the so-called plight of Black women is the notion that all Black women are looking for a husband" (as cited by Edwards, 1991).

Potential Explanations for the Decline in African American Marriage Rates

In a book entitled The Decline in Marriage Among African Americans Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan (1995) consolidate much of the recent research on the decline in marriage rates among African Americans. The book is an outgrowth of a conference held at the UCLA Center for Afro-American Studies in

1989. The book attempts to summarize the research up to that time conducted to explain the decline in marriage. First I will present some salient studies from this project, then I will present some other relevant studies that were not covered by this project.

Robert Schoen (1995) studied the issue from the perspective of socio-economic exchange. According to the theory of socio-economic exchange marriage is an exchange of a male's economic resources for a female's domestic services and persons will seek partners who maximize their rewards for marriage. Schoen examined marriage patterns in Wisconsin in 1980 by age, race and educational level. He concludes, "Black women have traditionally been more economically self-sufficient than white women and, given their economic position, have less to gain from marriage" (p. 114).

Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan (1995) presented research on marital behavior and expectations. The objectives of their research were to examine the differential relationship between perceived mate availability and objective assessments of sex ratio in distinctive sociocultural groupings; determine whether theoretical conceptualizations of mate availability are differentially relevant for those groups', and examine the contributions of structural versus attitudinal components to marital expectations and marital status. Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan administered the Southern California Social Survey to 1, 116 residents of Los Angeles, Ventura, and Orange counties during a six-week period in February and March 1989 using a stratified random-digit dialed telephone sample. Their research suggests that while African Americans continue to have favorable

attitudes toward marriage, economic concerns and mate availability constrain behavior among African Americans. They concluded, “Overall, this research has demonstrated that economic and mate availability concerns are differentially related to marital behavior and marital expectancy among socioculturally distinct groups. As predicted, economic as well as availability indicators were salient for blacks (both structurally and attitudinally). Economic factors were not as salient for whites, but perceived availability played a significant role as a correlate for both marital behaviors and expectations” (p. 166). Thus, while perceived availability is a marital constraint for both black and white women, economic factors were more of a constraint for black women.

Darity and Myers (1995) studied family structure and the marginalization of Black men. They analyzed a variety of economic data to create a formula for measuring the ratio of unmarried men in the labor force or in school to the number of unmarried women. They compare the ratio of Blacks to Whites in the U.S. population. Darity and Myers argue that the reduction in the supply of marriageable mates in the African American community is driving the increase in female family headship. They assert that, “...black men have become less useful in the emerging economic order; they are socially unwanted, superfluous, and marginal” (p. 263). Darity and Myers present evidence suggesting the decline of black males in the labor force is consistent with the declines in marriageability of these men, leading to the growth of female-headed families.

While it is often assumed that female-headed households is a growing phenomena in low-income communities, Burbridge (1995) finds the largest

growth in female-headed households has been among college-educated women who have better economic options. Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan conclude that more research is needed in the area of declining marriage rates among African Americans. They write, “We need clearer descriptions of how the daily lives of people are affected by these challenges, and how family formation decisions are now being made” (p. 356). The current study attempts to provide a clearer description of how these decisions are made among a small cohort of YHF African American women.

Others studies also cite the lack of available eligible African American men as a reason for the decline in marriage among African American women. Blake and Darling (2000) write that the quality of some African American males lives have been diminished because they are denied opportunities to become wage earners. As African American boys grow into men, they increasingly find themselves relegated to the margins of the socioeconomic systems of our society. The number of men who are murdered or imprisoned further decreases the availability of marital partners. Andrew J. Cherlin (1998) estimates that about 1 out of 100 15-year-old Black boys will die violently before they reach age 25, another 1 out of 100 die violently before age 35, on any given day 3 of every 100 Black men are in prison, and 1 of 100 age 18 to 44 are admitted to county mental hospitals. According to Hill (1993), the sex ratio among Blacks is widest among persons 25-44 years old--just when many young women are making decisions about marriage.

Not only does the total number of African American men available for marriage present a constraint, but an additional concern is the desirability of the men who remain in the marriage pool. By adulthood a number of potential husbands take themselves out of the market by declaring their homosexuality that further reduces the number and desirability of men in the marriage pool. Each African American male homosexual couple reduces by two the number in the marital pool unless there are equal numbers of African American lesbian couples (Smith, 1995).

Some writers believe African American women use a variety of strategies to deal with a limited marital pool. In Women of Color, Beverly Greene (1994) writes, “Another issue that surfaces for many African American heterosexual women is that of man-sharing [accepting that a man is unfaithful]. Many clients express considerable distress at what they perceive to be a paucity of available African American men and their consequent difficulty finding mates” (p. 15).

On the lack of available African American men, Dr. Elizabeth Gail Wyatt (1997) discusses the women she interviewed in her extensive studies of African American women and sexuality. She found, “While some of the women were willing to consider interracial dating and marriage, they were not willing to accept the notion that there are too many black women for too few men. Instead, their solution was to reconsider men who were initially thought to be unacceptable—regardless of ethnicity—and not to feel as if they were failures if they could not find a life partner” (p. 194).

For YHF African American women the shortage of suitable mates is further exacerbated by the expectation to find a mate with the same or similar economic power. In a random survey on psychological well being and perceived marital opportunity among single African American, Latina and White women over the age of 18 in Los Angeles, Ventura and Orange counties, Tucker and Mitchell Kernan (1998) found that African American women believed that an adequate income was more important to a successful marriage than whites did. In addition, Tucker and Mitchell found that Blacks, both male and female, were more likely than whites and Latinos to express a desire for marriage. They conclude that the reasons for not marrying are more related to demographics than the result of a fundamental change in attitude among Blacks.

YHF African American women facing a limited pool of potential mates are also faced with finding a mate who can contribute economically. In a discussion of the difficulties in building a strong black family, Nathan Hare (1986) writes, "...the fact remains that the successful black woman's plight is magnified by the fact that she must marry beneath her station in life more often even than a successful man ordinarily would" (p. 94).

The issue of economic viability of a potential mate was studied from the male side of this dilemma. Angela D. James (1998) concludes the difficulty in finding a mate who can provide economic equity is a persuasive explanation to the declining rates of marriage. According to James, "The decreasing proportion of employed Black men to available women is thought to be a causal mechanism explaining increases in female-headed households as well as delayed or

nonmarriage among African Americans” (p. 373). Perhaps these YHF African American women are choosing not to settle for anything less than full economic parity in a relationship.

Young High Functioning African American women are weighing the advantages and disadvantages of marriage and coming up with different conclusions than previous generations did. In a recent Valentine’s Day article in the Washington Post (2003) entitled, “Dating Game’s Tough Odds: Many African Americans Find Romance Difficult When Women Outnumber Men” noted therapist and author Audrey Chapman is quoted, “The uneven ratio of black men to women in the Washington area puts women interested in long-term relationships and marriage at a disadvantage, and that becomes more pronounced because the dating pool is further reduced by black men who can’t or won’t commit, those so involved in their careers that they have to put love on hold, and those who date outside their race.” In the same article, Chapman goes on to say, “...many black women are more selective than their mothers were in choosing a mate. They may be in a hurry to marry, but they often have unrealistic expectations. Professional women want a man whose income and career are on a par with theirs” (Thomas-Lester, 2003).

Additionally, African American women may find living as singles more fulfilling than White women because of the support they receive from their extended families. African American families have long been recognized as having extended relationships within their family structure. Family may include grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins and even play brothers and play sisters

(non relatives who are raised as brothers and sisters). The extended family provides support and works as part of the family unit in supporting children in the family (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Hill, 1993; Greene, 1994). Single-mothers with children find a good deal of parenting assistance in the extended family. This may influence many YHF African American women to live fulfilling lives as singles and to even consider single parenting as a viable option. Many Black women have postponed or given up marriage but are not willing to postpone having children according to a study on marriage and marital dissolution among Black Americans (Cherlin, 1998). For many YHF African American women having children makes sense, but having a husband does not.

An additional issue for YHF African American women may be the high rate of divorce among their parents. While the debate rages on about the impact of divorce on children, an interesting study that examined the long-term impact of parental divorce on beliefs about the self and others found children of divorced parents may have a problematic view of intimate relationships (Franklin, Janoff-Bulman, & Roberts, 1990). The study was conducted in two parts. Part 1 consisted of 568 university students from psychology courses. Part 2 consisted of 114 college-aged students in an introductory psychology course. This study found that while a child of divorce shows no difference in his or her ability to accept intimacy in dating relationships than those of intact families, he or she is particularly cautious about marriage and the ability to trust an intimate as a spouse.

Throughout my research, I constantly came across the profound role the Black Church plays in the lives of African Americans (Hill, 1993; Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Blake and Darling, 2002). According to Hill (1999) “Increasing evidence reveals that African Americans with strong religious orientations have higher social and economic attainment than those with little religious commitment (p. 4). The church may serve as both a resource for YHF African American women as well as serving as a coping mechanism during times of stress.

Susan Newman (2002) refers to the Black Church as “the beacon of hope in the Black community” (p. 146). According to Boyd Franklin and Franklin (2001), “Many of us of African descent throughout the world share a deep and abiding sense of spirituality and a belief in God or a higher power. This spirituality has provided strength and proven to be a survival skill in times of trouble” (p. 47). In many African cultures there is no separation between the spiritual world and the secular world. Religion becomes an integral part of living. In an article on resiliency in Black families, Hildreth, Boglin and Mask (2000) discuss Rutter’s concept of protective mechanisms. They write, “...protective mechanisms are facilitated and maintained through strong family relations, the Black church and a strong and mobilized community” (p. 2).

In summary, there seem to be a myriad of factors that may explain the declining marital rate among African Americans. These factors include: lack of available black men, high rate of divorce among their parents, the supportive kinship environment, the resources provided by the Black church, reluctance to settle for anything less than the perfect mate and greater opportunity for women in

the workforce. In response to Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan's (1995) declaration that more work needs to be done in this area, the current study seeks to gain more information on how a small group of Young High Functioning African American women perceive marriage and asks why they have remained single.

This study is limited to a specific cohort of African American women who are financially independent between the ages of 25 – 35. I have specifically chosen high functioning professional women because much of the research conducted with African Americans focuses on the lower income families. Much of what is written about African American families comes from what Robert B Hill (1993) calls the “deficit model” which attributes so-called problems of the Black family to internal deficiencies or pathologies. Hill goes on to say that “In contrast to the deficit perspective's fixation on the underclass or lower-class, the holistic approach underscores the importance of examining working-class, middle-class and upper-class blacks as well...” (p.11). Other researchers (Blake & Darling, 2000; Moseley-Howard & Evans 2000) discuss the focus on the perceived dysfunctional nature of African American life and the lack of studies on working class and middle class African American families. In addition to presenting new information on how a small group of African American women perceive marriage, I am seeking to provide a voice for a segment of highly functional African American families.

Theoretical Framework

The feminist perspective serves as a theoretical framework for this study. This is a unique lens from which to look at African American women as many

African American women have an uneasy history with feminism (Reinharz 1992). African American women have often seen feminism as a tool to advance the concerns of white middle class women. Additionally, feminism is perceived by some women and men in the African American community as a tool to divide men and women and thus dilute their focus on racism. Hare (1986) writes:

It is no wonder that black males and females are finding it increasingly hard to get along together, but we are ignoring this unfortunate fact in the name of a false racial pride. The problem, the black male-female schism, is complicated by the inability of the white-dominated feminist movement to answer crucial questions it has raised for female liberation. We, for our part, have failed to incorporate black women's liberations as an integral part of the general black movement (as against sporadic black female efforts which, in their simple mimicry of white feminists are too often hostile and contrary to the black male). The problem in turn is compounded by the displaced power struggle that presents itself between the black male and the black female (p. 18).

In an article in the *Journal of Black Studies*, Gareth E. Pauley (2000) paints a fascinating picture of the tension between the Women's Suffrage movement and the early Black civil rights movement. He quotes Susan B. Anthony as saying, "The old anti-slavery school say [sic] women must stand back and wait until the Negroes shall be recognized. But we say, if you will not give the whole loaf of suffrage to the entire people give it to the most intelligent first" (p. 388). According to Olivia M. Espin in a chapter of Women of Color, most

women of color are too caught up in immediate issues of survival to be concerned about feminism (as cited in Comas-Diaz & Greene, 1994).

However, living in a patriarchal society puts African American women in the distressing position of coping with both racism and sexism. According to Traci West (1999) even when Black women are included in feminist literature they are often considered an afterthought. She writes:

“... a major contention about conditions that affect women is often followed by a rejoinder beginning with the phrase, ‘And for black women...’ This is usually a sensitive display of inclusivity, an acknowledgement that there are peculiar racial and gender dynamics that impact black women. Yet it is also a reinforcement of ‘black women’ as ‘other,’ as different from the category of women that has been the subject of the rest of the study” (p. 3).

But, in spite of the uneasy partnership between African American women and feminists, both face many of the same problems in terms of creating and maintaining a family in a patriarchal society. Personal and institutional sexism produce gender role conflict that subordinates, restricts, devalues or violates women (O’Neil & Egan, 1992). Further, O’Neil and Egan list the following themes that get worked out in the integration of masculinity and femininity, success, control, power, personal worth, intimacy, emotionality, competition, body image and sexuality. These themes may play a role in YHF African American Women’s value of relationships, commitment and marriage. The

burden rests with women to successfully combine a career and manage children and household and perhaps these young women do not find the effort worthwhile.

Carol Gilligan (1982) writes about the criticality of doing research from a feminist perspective. She says that when women deviate from the “norm”, “the conclusion has generally been that something is wrong with women” (p. 14). Gilligan goes on to say, “...women bring to the life cycle a different point of view and order human experience in terms of different priorities” (p. 22).

Comas-Diaz and Greene (1994) remind us that African American women, unlike White women, have a long history of being in the workplace because racism made it difficult for African American men to provide for their families. Thus, rigid gender role stratification is somewhat impractical in African American families.

Boyd-Franklin (2003) reinforces the idea of flexible gender roles in the African American community. She writes, “Family members are apt to be more able to cope with changes in circumstances when not restricted to what is usually a sex-stereotyped, narrowly defined role” (p. 20). Many of this generation’s African American women have watched their mothers, aunts and grandmothers struggle to make significant financial contributions to the family while at the same time, preserving the psyche and dignity of their men. According to Jodie Kliman (1994):

“Many black women argue that it is more important to support sons, brothers, and partners who are being undermined and destroyed by a racist social structure than

it is to challenge gender based domination...this support exacts a high price” (p. 34).

YHF African American women are reaping the benefits of the feminist movement in their careers. However, do they adopt the feminist goals of equity in relationships in their personal lives?

In a book entitled, Why Women Shouldn't Marry, Smith (1998) reaches the conclusion that women of all ethnicities are just getting less out of marriage than they used to. It is well known that in dual career families, women assume more of the housekeeping and care giving responsibilities. Higgins, Dusbury and Lee (1993) describe two types of strain, overload and interference. They describe overload as the strain caused when the total demands on time and energy are too great to perform the roles adequately or comfortably. Interference occurs because of the overlap between work and family responsibilities. In summarizing their study, they say, "...balancing work and family is clearly more problematic for mothers than for fathers...These results suggest that gender differences in work-family conflict will continue until men take more responsibility at home and do not merely 'help out'" (p. 320). Is it possible that women focused on their careers do not have the energy or the desire necessary to raise children and raise a husband too?

Ethnographic Research

In a book entitled, Feminist Methods in Social Research, Shulamit Reinharz (1992) talks about "finding one's voice" (p. 16). She quotes Renate Klein as saying, "we cannot speak for others, but we can, and must, speak *out* for

others.” I have used an Ethnographic research methodology as a way to speak out for the women I interviewed. Reinharz says feminist ethnography is consistent with three goals: (1) document the lives and activities of women (2) understand the experience of women from their own point of view, and (3) conceptualize women’s behavior as an expression of social contexts (p. 51). Ethnography is defined as a research approach developed by anthropologists to study cultural groups that more recently has been used to study small-group culture (Gehart, Ratliff & Lyle, 2001). This methodology relies on interviews and observation to understand the perspective of the group being studied. Researchers attempt to provide a rich or thick description of experience, rather than explanation.

In Ethnography and Qualitative Design in Educational Research,

LeCompte and Preissle (1993) write, “Ethnographies re-create for the reader the shared beliefs, practices, artifacts, folk knowledge, and behaviors of some group of people” (p. 3). Ethnographic research is both a product and a process. The process involves methodologies by which the researcher gains the trust of the subjects being studied in order to observe and/or interview them in the most non-intrusive manner possible. It also involves a balance between the subjectivity of the researcher in attempting to report results in an objective manner. Clearly I find myself continually considering whether or not my own bias has caused a nuance to be assigned to the participant’s statement that comes from my own strong views on the topic. To the extent possible, I have presented the findings in the words of the subjects being studied without adding to or detracting from the context.

Rationale and Significance

The declining marriage rate is important to the marriage and family therapist (MFT) community because it will change the structure of the middle-class African American family. A recent Business Week article explored the debate over marriage, “In America, the debate over the relative prominence of unmarrieds and marrieds is likely to grow more complex and caustic as the tipping point nears. Some say that the country is sliding down a slippery slope, gutting one of the last social safety nets that exist” (Business Week, October 20, 2003). Promoting marriage and two-parent families is of great importance to policymakers. The benefits of marriage for adults (better health, greater longevity, and higher earnings) have been well documented and the benefits of growing up with two biological parents (more education, greater marital stability, and better mental health) are widely acknowledged (McLanahan, Garfinkel, & Mincy 2001).

It is important to focus on segments of a culture to understand what is happening in a specific segment and whether or not a phenomenon can be generalized to other parts of the culture. In our desire to be culturally sensitive, we sometimes assume that all Black families, or all Hispanic families, or all (fill in the blank) families behave in a certain manner. In an article on the relevance of multicultural training for MFT graduate students, we are cautioned against assuming that the manifestations of ethnicity will be the same for all families

(Preli & Bernard, 1993). Factors including region, socioeconomic status, and individual experiences define a family within a culture.

This research project examines a high functioning segment of the African American family in order to examine their decision to marry or not and glean from the study participants what seems to be contributing to this decision. The study is significant in that this decision to marry or not has the potential to change the structure of African American families. As Marriage and Family Therapists, we should become knowledgeable about changes in family patterns as well as changes in the family value systems of our clients. While this study is limited to a small cohort, it should provide a useful foundation for future study by presenting information about the perception of young women regarding marriage and the factors that influence their decision to marry or remain single.

It is also important for family therapists to understand the diversity in the African American family. Nancy Boyd-Franklin (1993) writes, “Too often, black families have been described in the mental health literature in pejorative, negative and stereotypical ways” (p. 56). Much of what is portrayed about our families and about African American females in particular is negative and stereotypical. Patton (2001) notes that it has become fashionable to joke about things like skin color, hair texture, and welfare checks on television. Wyatt (1997) writes about the pervasive stereotypes of the Sapphire and the over-sexed Black woman. By focusing on a highly functional segment of African American women, it is my hope that their stories will counteract the negative stereotypes that are often used to describe African American Women. The subjects of this study were intelligent,

thoughtful and hard working young women who, ideally, would like to share their lives with men who share their dreams for the future.

CHAPTER III: METHODS

This is a qualitative study designed to look at how Young High Functioning (YHF) African American women decide whether or not to marry as well as to begin to understand the factors they consider when making this decision. In conducting this study, I was open to the possibility that a decision is not made at all. I considered that these YHF African American women continue to hope for marriage, but find their options limited.

I chose an ethnographic study, as I was interested in hearing the stories of these young women. The study was structured in a way to maximize the narratives of YHF African American women through open discovery oriented focus groups followed by a few intensive structured interviews. I specifically structured the material and the focus groups to create an atmosphere for dialogue. In fact, the announcement flyer (Appendix A) invited the participants to “think of it as pajama party without the pajamas.” In reviewing the transcripts, I believe I accomplished that objective. Even though most of these YHF African American women did not know each other, the conversations were rich and self-disclosing. There was a good deal of laughter and many times when one woman would start a thought and another woman would finish the thought.

Participant Recruitment Process

The criteria for volunteers interested in participating in the study was African American women who met the following:

1. They are 25 – 35 years of age
2. They make at least \$35,000 per year

3. They have, at a minimum, a bachelor's degree
4. They are heterosexual singles who have never been married

Since no prescreening was done prior to the focus groups or the interviews I did not know whether or not participants met the criteria until they completed the profile sheet at the beginning of the focus group or interview. As a result not all of the participants met all of the criteria. This will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

My primary source of recruitment for the study was two African American sororities—Delta and AKA. I selected these groups because it was likely that a large percentage of their membership would meet my criteria. Also, African American sororities play a significant role in the African American community. Many women pledge sororities while matriculating through college and maintain these valuable networking ties throughout their lives. Additionally, sororities have a strong service component and I anticipated they would be supportive of research designed for African American families. I wrote a letter of introduction (Appendix B) to chapters of these sororities in the Washington D.C. metropolitan area. For the session in New York City, I depended on an e-mail that was forwarded for me by a sorority member to several women in the city who met the criteria. These two metropolitan areas were chosen for convenience and because a high number of YHF African American women are concentrated in these areas. I initially asked the chapter leadership for permission to hold a focus group meeting immediately after or just before a chapter meeting. I also asked for permission to include in the routine mailing of the chapter meeting announcement

the flyer soliciting volunteers to attend the focus group meeting. Several chapter presidents forwarded my e-mail with the flyer attached to young women who met my criteria rather than respond to my letter. These young women then contacted me either through my e-mail address or by phone. Additionally, as I spoke to these women and other women in my community about the study, others contacted me to express their interest in participation, thus creating a snowball affect.

Procedures

After identifying potential participants, three focus group meetings were scheduled between December of 2003 and January 2004—two in the Washington D.C. area and one in New York City. The two D.C. meetings were held in a hotel conference room and the New York meeting was held in an office. Participants completed an Informed Consent (Appendix C) and a Participant Profile (Appendix D) prior to the start of each meeting. All of the meetings were audio taped and the two meetings in the D.C. area were also video taped. Each meeting lasted from 1 to 1 ½ hours. Focus groups are usually composed of 6–10 people (Deacon & Piercy, 2000), but while four to seven women were confirmed for each focus group meeting only two participants actually attended each focus group meeting. This was an initial disappointment, but the dialogue in all three of the focus groups was rich and I collected an amazing amount of information at each one. In retrospect, I believe larger groups may have inhibited the kind of in depth responses I was able to gather. These dyads worked well for what I was trying to accomplish. I had fourteen open-ended focus group questions

(Appendix E). These questions were designed to encourage the young women to tell their stories from their unique perspectives. I allowed the participants to respond freely and allowed the other participant to tag on when something of particular interest to them was said. I purposely did not do a lot of probing of the answers and only asked follow-up questions when I wanted to gain clarity or the respondent segued to another question on my list. My goal was to stay out of the way of the dialogue to the extent possible. Because of time limitations, not all of the questions were used with each group.

In ethnographic research, data collection and analysis go together (Sprenkle & Moon, 1996) so I transcribed the discussions immediately following the focus group meetings. I began coding the transcripts as I continued to hold the remaining focus groups. Information gained from the focus groups was coded to develop major repetitive themes, identify categories where the women seem to have a good deal of cohesiveness and identify any new categories (Gilgun, 1992). Of particular interest was the synergy between the information gathered and the feminist perspective. Did financial independence play a major role in how these women perceived marriage? To what extent do power and equity issues play a role in the decision not to marry? What were their expectations of gender roles in marriage and relationships? Did they grow up with traditional patriarchal models of marriage? I used a constant comparative method (Sprenkle and Moon, 1996) to analyze the data. I was overwhelmed with the amount of data I had and began the analysis by developing a table to list the data elements that related to the questions asked and seemed of interest. I then compared the tables from each group to

begin to focus on some major themes that seemed to cut across groups. I went back to the transcripts and cut and pasted dialogue into document headings using these themes. In some cases, the dialogue fit under more than one theme, so there was some repetition of dialogue within the themes. Next I combined and refined the themes into the six major areas as delineated in the Chapter on Findings:

1. How Young High Functioning African American women perceive marriage
2. Expectations for balancing work and family
3. Criteria for a perfect mate
4. Dating experiences
5. The African American family
6. Spirituality

A set of structured interview questions (Appendix F) was developed to provide a better understanding of the themes developed through the data analysis. Initially I planned to select interviewees from the focus group participants. Since the focus group participation was so low, I felt that no new information would be gained by going back to these same participants. Instead, I used the pool of women who had expressed an interest in participating in the focus groups, but had not attended. Two structured interviews were conducted in March 2004 lasting from 1 ½ to 2 hours each. The two women interviewed were asked to complete an Informed Consent (Appendix G) and the Participant Profile. Unlike the focus group activity, I was more directive and used follow-up questions to probe for meaning in their responses. The environment was relaxed and conversational

much like the focus groups even though these interviews were more structured. Both interviews were transcribed, analyzed and sorted for major themes or new information.

As noted earlier, I did not prescreen the participants prior to meeting them at the focus group meetings or at the interviews. Therefore, I had three instances of participants who did not meet my minimum salary. One young woman had recently left a high paying job to go into business for herself, another had just finished graduate school and was job hunting and a third was an actress with a fluctuating salary. In addition, one of the women had not yet completed her undergraduate degree. Ironically, this young woman made the second highest salary of the participants. Even though these participants were outside of the initially identified cohort I am very comfortable that these women belonged in the group I am calling YHF African American women.

Limitations

Several limitations need to be noted in the study design. This study cannot be generalized to similar African American women. Another limitation is the small number of YHF African American women that I talked to. Further studies should include a larger population to test the replication of results. There could be several reasons the turn out for the focus groups was so small. One factor may have been weather. The first scheduled focus group was cancelled because of snow and the session in New York was held on a bitterly cold and windy day. Another factor may be the lack of incentive for these women to participate other than their interest in the topic. Certainly, the e-mail response and phone calls

indicated that there was a good deal of enthusiasm for the research project. Finally, these are very busy women. In addition to their careers, they volunteer their time through religious and civic organizations to perform community work. Finding a time when a critical mass was available for a focus group was a difficult task. Even though the participation was small, it is interesting to note the consistency of responses, particularly when I consider that only two of these women had ever met before. Another limitation is that all of the participants in this study live in one of two major metropolitan areas. It is likely that responses from other geographical areas may be different. The comments several of the participants made about their perception that men in the south have stronger family values than men in the north lead me to believe geographic region and rural vs. urban locale respondents may elicit significant differences.

In spite of the limitations, it is my hope that my discussions of these women is intriguing enough to encourage other researchers to begin to look at this issue so our discipline can begin to understand the dramatic increase in the percentage of African American women who never marry.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

Introduction

The title of my thesis is: Understanding How Young High Functioning (YHF) African American Women Perceive Marriage and Their Thoughts About Remaining Single. I was interested in learning whether or not my sample of YHF African American women desired to be married, what their expectations were of marriage and whether or not there is a process that leads them to a decision to remain single.

I conducted three focus groups to learn how YHF African American women perceive marriage and remaining single. Following the focus groups, I conducted two structured interviews to better understand information that came from the focus groups. Both the focus group transcripts and the interview transcripts were coded as the study continued in order to develop the specific themes presented here.

Participants

The sample consisted of six participants who attended one of three focus group meetings and two participants who were individually interviewed following the focus groups. Each participant completed a profile sheet after signing the informed consent. I advertised for women who were between the ages of 25 – 35. Two of the participants were between the ages of 25 – 29 and the remaining six were between the ages of 30 – 35. Three participants' annual salaries were below \$35,000, four were in the \$36,000 - \$55,000 range and one participant's salary was between \$56,000 - \$70,000. Of the three whose incomes were below \$35,000, one recently left a higher paying job to go into business for herself, one had just completed graduate school and was job hunting, and one is an actress who's salary fluctuates widely from year-to-year. Four of the

participants have Bachelor's degrees, three have completed graduate school, and one had some college, but no degree. Four of the participants were raised in households with both biological parents, one was raised by a single mother who was divorced from the father, one was raised by a single father who was divorced from the mother, one was raised by a single mother after the father died when she was a child, and one was raised by her biological mother and a step-father. Four of the participants considered themselves to be in a committed relationship and four were not in a committed relationship.

Although these eight women come from different family backgrounds, different regions of the country, and different occupations, their responses were surprisingly consistent on a number of issues presented to them. The discussions were fun and lively and looking at the transcripts it is apparent that we all kicked back, slipped into our "Black Folk's" English and enjoyed discussing views on marriage, families and dating experiences. The serious discussion was punctuated with a lot of laughter and affirmation over similar experiences. These young women are impressive, articulate, intelligent, and wise. They are risk takers who have either left well-paying jobs to start businesses or have traveled to new cities and countries away from their families to continue their education or pursue new job opportunities. I was impressed over and over at their level of achievement and their amazing focus on the future. They truly meet the criteria of being Young High Functioning African American women.

Major themes

I have divided the findings into six major themes around which there was considerable consistency in the responses of the participants. These six themes are: How YHF African American Women Perceive Marriage, Expectations for

Balancing Work and Family, Criteria for a Perfect Mate, Dating Experiences, The African American Family and Spirituality.

It is important to me that you hear from these YHF African American women in their own words rather than my paraphrasing what they said. The chapter is organized to allow the reader, through their quotes, to “hear” as much of the discussion as possible. I introduce the theme and provide a sample of supporting comments from both the focus groups and from the structured interviews. In some cases where there were a series of related comments from the focus groups, I labeled them, “From the Focus Groups” and provided them in a continuous string to help the reader “hear” these women’s voices.

How YHF African American Women Perceive Marriage

There was no question that all of these young women value marriage and want to be married. For some, it is a question of waiting for the right man to come along, for others it is more a question of waiting for the right time.

YHF African American Women Value Marriage

From the Focus Groups:

Aliceanne, 33, who left a promising career in the scientific field to start a service business said:

Marriage is something to be treasured. I feel that marriage is a gift from God. And marriage is something sacred and it shouldn’t be rushed...when the right person comes along you want to make sure he is the right person.

Another entrepreneur, Susan a 32-year old who left a high paying job to start a business said:

I've always wanted to be married, but most people who know me think that I never wanted to be married. Just because it's not something I talk about a lot.

Both Ellen, 32, a manager at a utility company and Kenya, 26, who had just completed graduate school had expectations of marrying soon after college. Kenya joked about how she had to keep moving her target date for marriage.

Ellen: I never thought I would be 32 and not on my way to marriage.

Kenya: Yes, I still have an expectation of getting married.

Like I said, at first it was like I'll get married at 21 once I finish college, then...OK, I'll move it back to 23...then, you know, 20, 21 came around...So now I'm 26 so now I'm at the point where, you know it will come when it comes.

The Right Time for Marriage

Two of the participants, Barbara, a 25-year old aspiring actress, and Aliceanne see marriage in their future, but were explicit that they are not in a hurry to get married now. For Barbara, the issue was how to postpone marriage and keep her relationship with her boyfriend who is anxious to get married, "...if I had my own way I would like to be engaged...by 27...and then in terms of getting married, I'd get married at 30."

Aliceanne stated, "And in a way I think my mother encouraged me to be single as long as possible to do what I needed to do...Give yourself time to learn yourself to be

comfortable with who you are and to learn how to do for yourself.” So while Aliceanne and Barbara want and expect to get married, they are not in a hurry to do so right now.

Aliceanne expressed a sentiment that struck a cord in all of the discussions. The women talked about the importance of being able to live a fulfilling single life and not wanting to feel pressured into marriage just to avoid being alone. Lynette, a military officer I interviewed individually, said if you are getting married just to keep from being lonely, that’s a problem. She went on to talk about the activities and travel that she has done as a single. “I can afford to...you know, have fun...You know, but I’ve actually come to enjoy my own company and I enjoy...because I don’t want to miss out on life simply because I didn’t have a man to go with.”

All of the participants showed a sense of patience whether or not they are anxious to marry now or willing to wait. Denise, a financial officer at a nonprofit organization, put it well when she said:

And I think, just from listening and listening to people talk, I think a lot of Black women, we want so much. You know we want this man to be so dynamic that we’re going to wait until we find him instead of taking somebody that they’re half of what we want.

And from Lynette I heard:

...because marriage is something very sacred I believe in, you know, waiting for what God would have for me. I don’t mean wait for a knock on the door...but to really want to make sure that I do it right because whatever, whoever, I marry I plan for it to be permanent.

The Biological Clock

These young women report that they hear their biological clocks ticking. Several of them are feeling some pressure to get married while they are still in the childbearing age.

From the Focus Groups:

Tonia, a promotions executive in her early thirties who is trying to break into television production said:

That [her biological clock] is ticking so loud in my head I think I'm going deaf.

Aliceanne: ...a lot of women are choosing to have children whether or not they're married...your clock's ticking it's like well I can't wait on a husband, but I can go ahead with the children.

Ellen: A man can have a child at 60 years old. A woman can't. So if you really have that maternal clock ticking, that's already against you at 32...and we don't even have a prospect of a husband.

Both of the women who participated in the interviews also talked about the pressure to get married while they are still in the childbearing age. Denise said she gets pressure from family members who ask her, "You know, when are we going to have a great niece or great nephew?" and Lynette reported her aunt told her, "Women shouldn't be having children in their 30's. You need to have them in your 20's."

Five of the women expressed a strong desire for children, three were less enthusiastic but seemed to expect they would have children if they were to marry.

Ellen said, “You know I can’t marry a man who wants four children because I don’t necessarily have to have any, I think.” She went on to talk about having no desire to marry a man who already has children. Lynette was also emphatic that she did not want to marry a man who already has children, saying, “And I...don’t want to get caught up in that...not just the baby’s mama drama, I don’t want to deal with the responsibility or the pressure of being a stepmother.”

The question for these YHF African American women is not whether or not to marry. They all want to be married, though two of them are not ready to march down the aisle right now. They believe that they will continue to develop and mature in a healthy way while they remain single and they believe there is a “right” time for each of them, although as they get older that right time is bumping up against their biological clocks.

Their Expectations for Balancing Work and Family

All of the women talked about the importance of their education and career goals and cited these as the major reason they have not yet married. It seems as if they are looking back retrospectively and realizing that they sacrificed opportunities to develop relationships while they built their careers. These are successful and hardworking women who are succeeding in a variety of difficult careers and are struggling to find men who can support their career aspirations. But at the same time, they are still envisioning how they will balance career and family.

Careers First

In response to the question, “Why haven’t you married?” all of the participants answered by saying in their college years and early twenties, their energies were spent on their education and then their careers.

From the Focus Groups:

Tonia: ...but before it was career, career, career. I wanted to make money. I didn’t want to have to depend on anybody for money. I wanted my own money.

Susan: I’ve always been very career focused. I loved school, so for me it was always about learning what I was going to do with my life and my future and not relationship focused...And so I think I was so focused on school and where I wanted to go with my career, men just always took a back seat for me. And I think most men do not take well to that.

Barbara: Definitely my career...So that was more important to me than actually going out on a date.

The women talked about the difficulty in finding men who were accepting of their goals and their careers. From their dating experiences they believe that many of the men they encounter seem to be intimidated by their careers or even demeaning of what they are trying to accomplish.

From the Focus Groups:

Tonia: They didn't understand. Men didn't understand the fact that I may have to get up in the middle of the night... You know, it's my job and they didn't get it.

Susan: And so I find a lot of times men would get frustrated with having to compete with work...

Aliceanne: So someone has to accept my career and accept my lifestyle...

It is interesting to note while these women are trying to get established in their careers, they believe that men of the same age are not at the same place they are. Aliceanne said, "I think also that African American women are more seriously committed about things..." There was also a perception that some of the men they meet are intimidated by their success. Denise told me:

I think it may be that the man has been intimidated. He's not ready to have a woman in his life that has a good job, you know, works two and sometimes three jobs if she has to. Has her own place, has a car. You know, he doesn't want a woman that can do for herself.

The Traditional Marriage

My expectation at the beginning of the study was to find that these YHF African American women were ready to embrace feminism and redefine marriage. Surprisingly, they seem to expect to have traditional marriages much like many women in the African American community who have a long history of working outside the home while also being primarily responsible for caring for home and children.

Those who were raised in two-parent families talked a lot about their parents' marriages and their expectation that they will do the lion's share of domestic chores. In discussing the trade-off's in getting married Ellen said:

So what I've always thought was let me go into it [marriage] knowing the compromises that I'm going to make or I'm willing to make...But I'm sure I will compromise. But I'm just going to accept the compromise and move, you know in a healthier space than trying to close a blind eye to it, marry him and then argue.

Related to Ellen's thought about compromise is Aliceanne's expectation of a woman's sacrifice:

Because once you get married and have children your life is technically not your own. You can't do what you want to do, go where you want to go because you have to consider somebody else first. You know you're living your life, basically, you are living your life for somebody else.

Even those who did not have the two-parent experience seemed to expect to make compromises in balancing career and family. From Susan I heard:

What I do admire and I've always admired are the women that are able to do it all. When I hear a woman stand up and do a presentation at a professional networking event and she mentions that she has been married for twenty years then for me, her kudos go up 20 points. To be able to manage with a family and a career.

Denise lovingly described her grandmother as a working woman who also took care of the traditional roles at home:

You know I saw her as the woman out there going to work and fighting for her family and traveling all over and basically doing what she wanted because she was a strong woman...What it's like to be a woman and how to keep your home and how to take care of your finances. I pretty much got all of that from my grandmother.

What I did not hear in any of the responses was an expectation to sit down with a potential husband to negotiate gender roles. Neither did I hear an expectation that because they are working women making very good salaries they expected their husbands to assume a larger share of the household responsibilities than their fathers did. Kenya said:

And so I think that it just prepares me to be more ready when the time comes...learning how to pay the bills, learning how to keep the house together. Dealing with time schedules and things like that...will help me so that when I add a husband to, you know, my household, you know then I can be able to say I got this with just me so now I can, you know, deal with the extra responsibility or way of living...

Notice Kenya's use of the phrase "add a husband" it sounds as if she does not see that as a major impact on her current lifestyle.

The overall impression I got from these women is they expected to keep on with their very busy lives and careers while layering the responsibilities of being a wife and mother on top of what they already do.

Perhaps it is hard for these YHF African American women to imagine the overwhelming burden balancing family and career can create if they have not first experienced the difficulty of trying to be the perfect wife, mother and career woman. In addition it may be difficult to imagine not doing it all if the role models you have are perceived as strong women who could maintain the balance between work and family without complaint.

Criteria for the Perfect Mate

All of the participants were asked what they wanted in a husband. What are their criteria? I was struck by how easy it was for them to respond to this question. It was obvious that they had given it a good deal of thought over the years. I was also surprised at the amount of consistency in their responses. They all talked about the need to find men who share their core value systems. These YHF African American women are looking for men who are: spiritual, value family, goal oriented and supportive.

A Man Who is Spiritual

Spirituality was the most frequently mentioned criteria. All but one of the women spoke extensively about how important God is in their lives and the need to find a man who shares that core value. As I will discuss later in this chapter, spirituality is an important component of these women's lives and they want a man who shares in their beliefs.

From the Focus Groups:

Barbara: And that is so important to me because I feel that I know now that like, with me, I can do anything with God. And I need my man to believe that too.

Tonia: With my boyfriend now, we've had a very close relationship with God.

Aliceanne: ...and he could live his life for God and we could have a wonderful life.

Susan: I need to have something that spirituality guides your decisions, your day-to-day decisions. Because if I need to relinquish control, submit, I need to know that the same way that I make decisions which is from a spiritual perspective, that you make those decisions as well...I think my bottom line, I definitely think that shared life vision that at the end of the day at 55, the choices we've made have come up to this—spiritually, family, financially.

A Man Who Values Family

This was the second most frequent response. Most of these women are looking for men who will put their family first.

From the Focus Groups:

Kenya: ...someone who is going to be able to attend to the family because there are some men who work so much that they're not able to be around for the family. And I want somebody that's

going to be able to attend to the family—not just work...But someone who's going to be there, you know, when you know we're gonna get this house together...Or we're going to have a family together...we're going to deal with the problem at school together. You know. We're just going to do things together. Just a lifetime partnership.

Aliceanne: A family man...

Susan: ...a man who wants children and family is very important.

During our interview, Denise talked about how important family is to her, “Someone who is definitely close to their family...because I am so family oriented...”

An important part of valuing family seems to be how a man treats his mother. This came up several times. Aliceanne said, “And he has to be good to his mother too, or be good to his sisters. Cause if he mistreats his mother or mistreats his sister he would surely mistreat me.” In summarizing her criteria for a mate, Ellen responded, “What do I need? I need a man that's spiritual, loves his mother...” And from Tonia I heard, “...find out how well he treats his mother and if you don't even respect your Mom...how are you going to love and respect me? There's no possible way.”

A Man Who is Goal Oriented

The next most frequent response was a man who is goal oriented and ambitious. Unexpectedly, the women did not equate this trait with financial security. It seemed to be more related to someone who shares the women's same

sense of drive and focus on the future. In terms of financial security, they seemed more interested in making sure that a future husband could support the lifestyle they have already chosen than in the money he would potentially bring to the table. Susan said:

...but I would, I've traveled a lot already so I would like at the very least be able to maintain my current lifestyle...So I mean, I'm willing to make sacrifices but at the same time I don't want to as we call it, live on the half with a husband. I don't want us to struggle from month to month.

Ellen agreed, saying, "I agree with Susan. It's not how much you make, it's what do you really want out of life?" In our interview, Denise talked about the likely difference in her salary and her potential mate's. "That man that's not going to say, 'Oh she makes more money than me.' ...Instead of saying, 'Oh my gosh, go make some more!'"

What they think about a man having goals was best summed up by a statement Tonia made, "You can ask a guy where do you see yourself in five years and they'll say, 'I don't know.' ...You don't have a plan and right there, I'm like, uhhh check, you're gone!" The concept of the importance of the men in their lives having a plan for the future came up repeatedly in the discussions. For Lynette having a plan for the future means a man has a home, a car, and a job that is taking him somewhere. She said:

I want to see a sense of stability and self [and that] means that he is not living at home with his mother...Is it because mother is sick

and almost dying so he wanted to help her...If it's 'Nah, my credit's jacked up and I can't get my own apartment' ...that tells me a lot right there.

At the first focus group Ellen explained why the guy who changes tires at Sears would not be on her list:

And probably that's why we really won't date the man that changes our tires at Sears even though he seems nice...some of us are holding on to 'I want a certain life style' and I at least want a man who can meet me where I am.

This then led to an interesting discussion of understanding why this man works at Sears. This intrigued me so much, I asked all of the subsequent groups and the participants I interviewed whether or not they would date the "guy at Sears changing tires." The consensus of all but one participant was that if this guy had goals and ambition, if he planned to one day own a Sears franchise he might be on the list.

From the Focus Groups:

Susan: So if right now you're only making \$28,000 but you have a plan and you are working towards your plan and you can articulate it and it makes sense and it's doable and realistic, then I think I could maybe deal with that.

Tonia: I don't want someone that's content but if that's where he's starting, that's great. But I need you to think further...

Kenya: ...to me it seems like if you're changing my tires at Sears and you have no desire...to go beyond that, to me, like I say, I want somebody who's goal oriented.

Aliceanne weighed in with a different opinion on the "guy at Sears". She felt that the kind of job a person did or the number of degrees was not important if he was a good man who shared her values. Lynette said she used to believe that having a degree was essential:

That was our [Black women] thing. We wanted to make sure they have degrees...because in her mind the college degree meant he'll get a job and a job is security. And a woman wants security...she's not afraid that what if he turns around and loses his job because he's just working with UPS or something.

Goals, having a plan and being ambitious is a trait all of these YHF African American women want in their mate. While they were not in total agreement on whether or not a degree, being a professional or having a high income is required to meet this standard, they were united in expecting a mate to have a plan for his future and the future of his family.

A Man Who is Supportive

Most of the women talked about how important it is that their perspective husband serve as a trusted friend. They want a man who is in their corner cheering them on when they need encouragement and celebrating with them when they have reached their goals. Barbara talked about how critical it is for her boyfriend to understand the pressures and the unpredictability of her acting career.

She said, “He trusts me whole-heartedly. I trust him...that’s why I call him my partner. Because, he’s incredibly supportive. And, just, he understands.” Tonia agreed that her boyfriend is behind her pushing her when she is feeling discouraged, “And it was like, you know, this is what I need. You know, somebody there that’s supporting me.” Kenya wants “Someone that I would think that I could talk to like a friend.” And Aliceanne said, “...and I need somebody supportive. Like supportive of what I’m doing, supportive of who I am or whatever. And to know, you know, what it means to have a good woman in his life.”

The concept of being treated like a “queen” in a relationship came up repeatedly. I believe this is related to the notion of being supported. In the discussion of the “guy at Sears” Aliceanne said, “...he could treat me like a queen.” Earlier in the discussion she stated that women are something to be “treasured”. Barbara talked about her relationship, “After now having a boyfriend who treats me like a queen every day...I never had someone to treat me like I deserve to be treated...”

I asked Denise during our interview what this term “treated like a queen” meant to her. Her reply was it meant she wanted to be taken care of, “I mean not in the sense that I can’t take care of myself. I think everybody likes to be taken care of. And I would love to have somebody do that for me. To, you know, be concerned about my feelings.” There seems to be a conflict in these hard charging career women also wanting to be nurtured and appreciated for their softer side.

The concept of being treated like a “queen” in the African American culture originates in our history in this country. During slavery African American women were the property of the slave owner. Their men (or husbands if they actually had been able to marry) were powerless to protect them from sexual abuse, physical beatings or being sold to a neighboring plantation. Thus the concept of being an African Queen emerged during the Black Power movement to convey that African American women deserved to be treated with respect, to be cherished for their beauty, and to be protected by their men. This is best conveyed in a passage of the book, Stolen Women (Wyatt, 1997), “If he is warm and sensitive and cares about me, then he’s going to see me as his queen and be my king” (p. 192).

Several of the women talked about men “having their back” providing for their safety and security needs. Barbara said, “I mean if I fall, he’s like you know, here I am.” Tonia talked about her boyfriend’s response to her fear of sitting with her back to a door:

But like the guy that I’m with now...I have a fear of...sitting with my back to a lot of people...So if we’re in a restaurant and he will always tell me...you know I always have your back. You don’t ever have to worry...and I think that makes me feel better, but I still want this seat!

While these young women are perfectly capable of taking care of themselves, they still want a man who can step in and protect them when they are feeling vulnerable. They want a man who will be nurturing and provide a safe secure

place for them to let their guard down. These women want men who share their core values of spirituality, family, goal oriented. They also want men who are supportive and “have their backs”.

Dating Experiences

We talked a lot about the men they are currently dating or have dated in the past. A pattern seemed to develop as they talked about dating for fun vs. dating to find the right man. In discussing their dating experiences, I also got to hear about what they do not want in a mate and their perceptions of African American males they come in social contact with.

Pattern of Dating

Most of the women said they did not get serious about dating until they reached their mid-twenties. It seems for several of them, their early dating was done non-selectively. Ellen said, “You know I spent a lot of energy and time on dating and having fun, but not building toward marriage.” Barbara agreed saying, “...you’re just trying to be cool and have fun...I didn’t think about getting married.” Several participants speculated that if they knew then what they know now, they would have been more selective about dating in college. Ellen went on to say, “ So while you’re dating that one that doesn’t need to be on the list, there are three good guys that, you know, you might have missed out on.”

Most of them report that now that they are older and beginning to look for Mr. Right, they now limit their dating to men who seem to have the potential to meet their criteria. As Susan said:

I only date men who meet my core values. And I've pretty much been like that, I know I can say at least the last five years of my life. Yeah, probably, at least the last five years and that's why I have only dated two men!

How the Sex Ratio is Perceived

I asked all of the women for their opinion on the literature that says the ratio of Black males to Black females is one of the biggest obstacles facing them in terms of finding available men. While all acknowledged that they perceive there are many more African American women than African American men in the dating pool, they are less concerned about the availability of Black men in the pool and more concerned about the eligibility of the men that are in the pool. For these women, if you do not meet their core values as delineated above, you are not in the pool they are drawing from. Therefore, they recognize that the pool is very constricted, but constricted because they are walking around with a list of what they are looking for in a man.

From the Focus Groups:

Tonia: I'm extremely picky when it comes to dating. I think long term...I'm thinking future.

Aliceanne: I mean I don't think there's a good selection of, at least I don't see them, of men that meet my, you know, qualities that I would like for a man...I actually feel like if I'm meant to be married that God is preparing me for that time and he's preparing

the other person for that time...when things are always right for me, I always know when its right.

In introducing this topic of ratio differences in the focus group discussions, I always started by listing the reasons African American men are thought to be in such short supply. I usually started with those who are in jail, those who have been murdered...and often one of the women would add “and those who are gay” as I was going through the list. Aliceanne expressed concern about guys who cover up their homosexuality by also dating women. She said, “...so many guys up here [D.C. area] are living these double lifestyles...” Denise laughed about a man she met through an Internet dating service who confessed to her that he had not talked to a woman in a long time. She laughed, “And I’m like, ‘Oh my God’. All this time. Two months have gone by...And you’re just telling me”? Many of the women shared the opinion that African American men’s homosexuality is a reason that their pool of eligible men is decreasing.

The ratio of men to women in the African American community is the issue that is most often used to explain the difference in our marital patterns. I was expecting to hear these YHF African American women complaining about the difficulty in finding a man. However, I came to understand that the issue for them is not so much finding a man as it is finding the right man.

Lynette was the only woman who talked about dating outside of the race. She said she would prefer an African American male but was open to men of

other races. She said in response to the question about ratio, “Yeah and if you strictly want someone within your race that’s your choice. But understand the wait will be longer.” To my knowledge, Lynette is the only participant who is bi-racial and this may contribute to her willingness to look at other ethnicities.

The Perceived Immaturity of African American Men

The women talked a good deal about their experiences with the men they date. There was consensus among these women that African American men mature at a slower pace than African American women. Susan defined it as a lack of resiliency:

And so I think the resiliency is the issue of they feel beat down on every hand. The ‘man’ always has his foot on their neck and I think that he does [laughter] but just really being able to get past that. They have so many obstacles.

Ellen agreed with Susan and added:

I see it in my father and my nephew. Women, we just really are going to take lemons and make lemonade. Men are going to think that stepping back from whatever they’re doing is going to make it better. Women, if we have a crisis we go to someone. God, minister, friend...Men go in.

I asked Denise whether she found the men she went out with to be immature:

These men have so much potential and come from these great families and have great men in their lives that show them the way

and they're not doing anything or they're so immature and I don't know where or how they go about growing up.

Several of the women talked about their attempts to help the men they meet. Denise talked about helping a man who had just moved here from New York by setting up a job interview for him. Both Ellen and Susan talked about helping men improve their resumes and clean up their credit. Susan went on to say, "It does not necessarily guarantee that because you were the woman that helped him get through six life changing obstacles that he's really going to marry you." Many of the women seem to be willing to provide a helping hand to men they perceive share their values but lack the maturity these women have.

Their Perception of How African American Men are Raised

Several of the women seemed to think that many of the men they meet have not had good father/husband role models. Ellen said:

And I think it's because their mothers have seen them bring 72 girls home, so when is this going to stop?... You know you date this girl, you go on trips with her she's at the pastor's anniversary dinner. Why three years later are you still not married and every so often I hear you on your cell phone talking to a woman that's not her? Dad wasn't at home, mother over compensated and they're 32 and their mother still washes their clothes, pays their bills and cooks...

Aliceanne, who felt strongly that men in the south are raised to be more family

oriented than men in the north had quite a bit to say on this topic:

And a lot of times what they see their fathers doing when they were at their father's house on the weekend they may have a couple of women over there...And guys growing up thinking that's cool...Their father did them like that [left the family] and they'll do another female like that and it'll go on and on until someone breaks the cycle...Up here [North compared to South]...I feel like women are just to see how many you can get. So you know, if you get married you can't just roam like you want to roam.

These comments seem to indicate some of these YHF African American women believe some of the men they have dated have grown up with insufficient role models for being a good husband or a good father. They feel this contributes to African American women's inability to find men who meet their criteria.

There is an old adage in the African American community that mothers raise their daughters and love their sons. In Boys Into Men, Raising our African American Teenage Sons, Nancy Boyd-Franklin and A. J. Franklin (2001) write, "African American mothers, aware of the many risk factors facing our male children, have often overcompensated by trying to give them the love that society often denies them" (p.18). The women I talked to believe that African American males mature more slowly than African American women and are less resilient when faced with adversity. They also perceive that part of this is a result of African American men who are raised with insufficient male role models and/or mothers who overcompensate.

The African-American Family

The model for marriage and family for most of these women were their families of origin. While they represent a diversity in the structures of their families of origin, they all painted pictures of warm, loving, supportive families.

Their Model for Marriage

Most of the participants expressed strong sentiment for the importance of family and talked about how their parents' or grandparents' relationships influenced them.

From the Focus Groups:

Aliceanne: My parents were the type till death do you part really. The family is family. No matter what you're going through it can be worked through...You stuck with your family. Family was family. You didn't break up the family...Being married is not easy. Having children is not easy but you have to work together to make it what it should be.

Kenya: Well, my parents...I definitely learned commitment. They stayed together. They haven't always been happy with their situation, but they have always worked through things. They always stayed together and I think that both of them feel like they have to honor marriage and keep the family together.

Denise talked about the importance of her grandparents in her life:

They met when my grandmother was 17 and my grandfather was 20...So they had been together all that time and their marriage is

what I want my marriage to be...they meshed like perfectly...They raised seven kids, twelve grandchildren and they were just two of the most dynamic people that you ever wanted to meet.

The African American Family is Often Portrayed as Dysfunctional

Several participants believe that there is little recognition in our society that African Americans have healthy and vibrant families. Aliceanne said:

There are a lot of people who grew up with both their mother and their father. There's a lot of people who have wonderful families...And I think we lose sight of what a family is and then on television they're always showing us broken homes and single parent families and, you know, teenage mothers.

Several women mentioned the television celebrity, Oprah as a positive role model for living as a single. However, Susan disagreed:

So because Oprah has chosen to really have a live-in boyfriend for 20 years. I don't like that. Because I think the Black family is under attack and I think that it's very important for us to promote family and I don't think there is enough promotion of family.

The Nontraditional Family

Those women who came from other than two-parent homes found it harder to define models for marriage. Susan said, "My father died when I was six, so my Mom again dated...I never really saw my Mom put a lot of energy from what I could see into relationships." Denise's mother and father were not married. Her mother married when Denise was 8 years old:

I see how she interacts with my stepfather and how she handles situations. You know, when you're a child the perception is so totally different...everything's perfect. Then when you become an adult, their lives...that wasn't the way it should have been...I'm honestly surprised it's lasted this long. But I think my mother stayed in the situation for...some kind of stability.

Barbara was one of two participants who had parents who divorced. She said, "Maybe that's why I'm so scared of the whole marriage thing. Because I'm really not familiar with that at all...They separated when I was five. Divorced when I was seven. I can't even remember my parents being together." The other participant who lived through a divorce was Lynette. Her situation was unique because her mother abandoned her several years after the divorce. Here is what she said, "...then they were divorced and I was with my Mom. My Dad would pick me up on weekends. And then my mother left after that and I was with my Dad. She just left, so I was with my father since then." Though they were not raised in homes with two biological parents, Barbara and Lynette still expressed the same strong feelings about marriage being permanent. It is important to Lynette to make the right choice for a husband, "But to really make sure that I do it right because, whatever, whoever I marry I plan for it to be permanent." Several of the women felt that you cannot go into marriage thinking of divorce as an alternative.

The Influence of Mothers

It was clear from all of the participants that behind these successful young women are strong mother figures. Mothers who pushed, sacrificed, corrected, cajoled and loved these young women into maturity.

From the Focus Groups:

Ellen: I think she [her mother] values the couple more than her independence, but I think she has to exert that she is dominant in the relationship...I think what I've learned from my mother is that marriage, women make a lot of compromises in marriage even when they have chosen the man of their dreams.

Tonia: My mother was always involved in so many activities. We were always in ballet and tap and piano lessons and I always had something going on...And my mother's very bossy.

Aliceanne: ...I feel like there were other things that my mother wanted to do. My mother was a stay at home Mom. But she always used to tell me do what you want to do and live your life, you know, before you get married and have children. Because once you get married and have children your life is technically not your own...No, my mother wasn't a career person. She didn't have a six-figure job or whatever. But, I believe that God put her here to be a mother and a wife, and to me, she did the best job she could possibly do.

Denise talked about the influence of her grandmother:

I think my grandmother had more influence on me than my Mom did...Because she treated everybody the same. I mean she would have made a homeless person living on the street feel like they were a king just by saying two words to them.

Lynette was the only participant who grew up without her mother. It was interesting that what she said about her father mirrors some of the comments above about mothers, “You know we struggled a lot in this household...Dad is trying really hard, but things are getting worse. But he was pushing me. Just do well in school. You’ll be something because that was very important to him...Dad was always stressing about being a young lady.”

The Influence of Fathers

Strong fathers were also part of our discussions. Tonia talked about her father’s respect for her mother, “So I never heard my mother called out of her name [disrespected by name calling] or anything like that...I expect...to be treated a certain way. Just because I saw how my father treated my mother.”

Aliceanne was proud of what her father had achieved:

...my father was a contractor all his life. He never really worked for anybody, he always built houses. Mind you, my father only has a sixth-grade education. When I used to come home with my word problems...My father was the one who helped me with the word problems because when you think about it, how many two by fours you need to build a house, he’s dealing with word problems every day.

I asked Denise what she wanted in a man. She said she wanted a man like her grandfather and uncle. Denise said, “A man that works hard. Works two sometimes three jobs to support himself and his family...somebody who is a provider. But you still want that woman who can do for herself.”

These male role models and the one who chose to raise his little girl after the mother left are the benchmarks of what they are looking for in a husband. Once again we encounter the conflict of these independent women admiring very traditional gender role relationships.

The Kinship Network

In addition to mothers, fathers and grandparents, the conversations were peppered with references to other kin and “fictive” kin who have had major influence in the lives of these young women. Ellen made a clarifying statement that she is talking about “blood” relatives not kinship, “You know if I have 12 cousins, blood cousins not, you know, god mothers but like on my mother’s side of the family.” Godmothers were frequently mentioned, Kenya told me, “Well my Godmother was single and she was very successful.” Aliceanne said, “I have people who grew up with me, or who my mother was like a mother to them and we’re still just as close as if we were sisters and brothers and we’re still like family.” And from Denise I heard, “...my best friend is a person I know who is always going to be there for me and he always has been. He’s like my brother. Even though I already have a brother.”

This network of extended family is an additional support in the lives of these young women and perhaps this network makes it easier for them to be

comfortable with being single.

Family Support for Being Single

While all of the women expressed an interest in being married, they agreed that their families are very comfortable with their single status. They may hear the occasional question about when they are going to marry, or more frequently, produce grandchildren, as I discussed earlier, but all of the women said their families are supportive of their lifestyle. Denise said, “My family is accepting of everything I do. Of course as long as I’m not going out there trying to kill somebody or something [laughs]. I think they will still be there for me too. My family has always been one that has stuff together and helps each other out.”

From the Focus Groups

Susan: Ah, pressure [to get married] is strong. . .my Mom makes comments about the fact that I’m single and all of my girlfriends are single...but pressure is definitely not the right word...I think it’s because...they see the path that I’ve taken and I think they kind of understand...

Ellen: So I don’t think she really is concerned. I think my Mother thinks that I just haven’t met the right person and she’s been married for 40 years and has a sensitivity to what that means...I think my Mother would rather me stay single the rest of my life than to marry and divorce.

Kenya: I don't feel pressured by my aunts and my uncles. They may say, 'Are you seeing someone?' You know, they'll ask me about that. But, I don't feel pressured at all.

Even though they do not feel pressured by their family members, many of them are wrestling with living a meaningful single life. I liked what Lynette had to say about living as a single. "You know, it's OK in just being patient and waiting for the time to come. And in the meantime learning to enjoy my singleness and not sit back in loneliness and despair think all hope is gone and I can't live and...no enjoy living..."

Single Role Models

Most of the women reported they did not really have single role models in their lives. When they look at older women who are single, they question whether or not they are happy. Denise talked about one of her aunts who is single:

I don't know that I could be, you know 40 years old and still be single and be totally happy. It would just, you know, once I've done everything I want to do there's still that one thing that's missing. And I think if she were married, she would be happier. I really don't think she's happy now.

Kenya was impressed with an older woman in her church:

She's about 40, but I remember her just standing up and saying, 'I'm single and I'm happy.' And so thinking through those relationships and thinking about what she said and thinking about my aunt, although she's been married and divorced and is single

now, and thinking about, you know, it's OK....It's OK to be single.

Their Perception of How They Differ from White Women

It is likely that many of the problems these women face in finding the right mate and in their dating experiences are the same for all women. However, there were several comments regarding the perception that their experience is different from that of White women. Tonia told this story:

My freshman year there was a class I was taking. Part of the class was about African American families and the first thing my college professor said was that Black women go to college for education and White women go to find a husband...And then when I got older, I, you know I have friends who are White and most of my White friends, that was their thing. They know that was what was supposed to happen. I'm going to meet my husband in college and we're going to build our careers together. And with us, it was always...I need to get my job, I need to get straight, I need to be settled. I need to be me and then I'll find him...

I repeated this story to Denise when I interviewed her and asked what she thought. She said, "I believe that. I totally believe that." She went on to say:

I mean it's funny when I think back to going to clubs and think how White women approached or acted when men approached them and how Black women act. The Black women we're kind of just, hey, whatever...Whereas the White women, they were you

know itching for somebody to come and talk to them and disappointed if they didn't see anybody.

Aliceanne disagreed with the perception that White women's experience is different. She said, "It's universal. I have some White friends and it's like we have the same discussion. They can't find anybody...they have the same issues with guys so I don't think it's just African Americans. It's a universal female problem."

Spirituality

Spirituality is an important facet of these women's lives. In addition to faith being the number one criteria for the man they will marry, their conversation is filled with references to their beliefs. In the African American culture, the Black church is frequently seen as an extension of the family, part of that "fictive" kin mentioned earlier. In addition, faith and spirituality seem to be a coping strategy for these young women. Most of these YHF African American women seem to believe if you have done all you can do, then trust and believe that God will take care of you.

In describing a book she had been reading, Susan said, "And what this woman embraces is that if you wanted to get married, you chose to get married, it is your responsibility to pray your marriage through". Barbara said, "I didn't go to church every Sunday, but now I'm making it a habit to go to church every Sunday and I'm spiritually developing myself." And from Aliceanne I heard, "...I believe if you're a Christian, you're a Christian at heart, you're living your life for the Lord everything else will fall into place."

Most of the women interviewed believe that if God has a plan for them to be married, and if he has created a man for them, it is just a question of patience and obedience. Lynette has worked in the single's ministry in her church. She felt it was important to be a role model for other singles trying to live a Christian life, "And that's something else that's important to me because when they ask why or what then I would have a testimony to tell them...To show them, you know, if you really learn to trust God...it will work out if its his will." This faith seems to be an anchor that allows single women to be comfortable with who they are, continue to develop themselves and know, whatever happens, is God's will. Thus, the Church serves as both a resource for strength, a place for social activities, and faith is a coping strategy in the lives of these YHF African American women.

Summary

I have presented the findings from my focus groups and from my interviews. I have attempted to present the findings using the voices of the women who participated in my study.

These YHF African American women value marriage and expect to have traditional marriages even if they did not grow up in a two biological parent home. These women chose career building over relationship building and are now beginning to feel some frustration and pressure to find the man who shares their core values. They shared their dating experiences and their perception of the eligible men that are in the dating pool. The women represent viable and loving African American families who are fully supportive of their single life style.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

Introduction

The title of my thesis is: Understanding How Young High Functioning (YHF) African American Women Perceive Marriage and Their Thoughts About Remaining Single. This study presented a summary of discussions with eight YHF African American women about this topic. As the researcher, I attempted to present what the women said with minimal interpretation or bias. This study was not meant as an attempt to contrast African American women and White women. Rather it was an attempt to capture the perspective of these YHF African American women who participated in the study.

I would summarize the study by saying, “Yes”; these young women want to marry. The major themes from the study are:

1. The women in the study value marriage and want to be married
2. These women have traditional gender role expectations for balancing work and family
3. They have given a good deal of thought to the criteria for their ideal mate and are able to articulate it
4. Their dating experiences suggest a pattern for mate selection
5. These women were raised in strong loving and supportive families
6. The Black church is an important resource for these women

In addition to providing a discussion of the major themes, I also provide in this chapter a look at these YHF African American women through a feminist lens, which served as my framework for this study. Finally, I incorporate in the

discussion of African American families a concern expressed about the manner in which the media portrays African American families. I will begin this discussion with feminist perspective that shaped this study.

Young High Functioning African American Women and Feminism

My expectation going into this study was that feminism would change the way this generation of young women views gender roles in marriage. However, this did not prove to be true. These women are not feminists in terms of questioning the traditional power/equity issues of marriage nor pushing for equality in a marriage where both the man and woman work. In fact, some of them seem very comfortable with the idea that they might be both the principal breadwinner and the principal homemaker. Their role models for marriage are their parents' or grandparents' marriages. They expect to make sacrifices in order to balance careers and families much in the same way their mothers made sacrifices.

In an article posted on the Internet, Melanie S. Schernezal (www.kmjg.com/SISTASUPERWOMAN.html) talks about a controversial book written 25 years ago, Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman. She says, "Many Black women today are still burdened by the notion that they must bear everyone else's responsibilities...Historically rooted in slavery, there was a notion that Black women were incapable of being overworked."

It may be that, for these young women, this stance is yet to be tested as none of them have yet experienced the trials and tribulations of balancing a family and a career. In an article that appeared in Integrating Family Therapy, Philpot

and Brooks (1995) write that many career women find they need a “wife” to run the home and take care of the children:

Given that women have been trained for centuries to believe they should take primary responsibility for raising the children and nurturing a marriage, even when they can afford help, these women suffer pangs of guilt and periods of conflict regarding the amount of time and energy their career takes away from the family (p. 311).

Many partners of working women still feel they are “helping out” when they are asked to pitch in with the housework.

In a recent Time (April 5, 2004) magazine interview, Gloria Steinem is asked this question, “Some younger women seem to run from the feminist label. How can you inspire them to be passionate about women’s rights?” Steinem replies:

If younger women have a problem, [with the label], it’s only that they don’t know yet that there’s a problem. The kind of radicalization that happened to my generation when we tried to get a job happens to them 10 or 15 years into the job, when they fail to get promoted. Women tend to be conservative in youth and get more radical as they get older because they lose power with age. So if a young woman is not a feminist, I say just wait (p. 8).

Perhaps we just need to wait until these YHF African American women have had more experience integrating family and careers to see if they become more radical in their views about gender roles in marriage.

These young women have either broken glass ceilings or are rising through glass ceilings broken by the previous generations in the work world. They are strong and independent and they have benefited from the generations of feminists who have made their career and educational options possible. However, a conflict exists in that they do not seem to carry a feminist perspective to their personal relationships.

These YHF African American women say they want to be treated “like a queen”. This came as such a surprise that I found it necessary to probe this concept during the structured interviews. The concept of being treated like a “queen” who is nurtured and taken care of may be a reaction to the energy it takes to succeed in a racist society. Perhaps what this really means is that hardworking African American women, much like hard working African American men are looking for a sanctuary at the end of the work day where they can feel accepted, loved, comforted and refreshed. Anderson J. Franklin (1993) refers to the “sixth sense” African Americans have to detect racism. This duality of living and working in the majority culture while also functioning in the minority culture can be stressful. This paradox of being treated like a queen requires more study than I was able to do with such a small group.

Pattern for Mate Selection

This small sample group of YHF African American women values the sacredness of marriage and they want a lifelong partner with whom to share their lives. A pattern for mate selection emerged in their discussions. During their college years they are dating for fun. They want to experience a lot of different types of men, and begin to learn more about who they are and their needs for a partner. At this time, they also begin to focus on their educational and career goals. As these women become more career oriented, they find not only that they do not have a lot of time and energy to invest in relationships, but also a number of the young men they come in contact with do not support their career focus. As the young women get older and begin to desire a mate and/or begin to attend to their biological clocks they limit their dating to those men who seem to meet their core values. At this point in the process, they begin “auditioning” men. They begin looking for that “Mr. Right” who meets their criteria for a mate.

Mate Selection

It appeared that the women in the study have given an enormous amount of thought over the years to what they want in a husband. Through their dating experiences, they have refined their needs to several specific core values, (1) spirituality, (2) family values (3) goal orientation, and (4) supportive partners. It appears that these women are willing to work to “polish” men who meet their core values. They are willing to help them write their resumes, to take them to social functions where they can increase their networks, and to introduce them to travel and other cultural experiences.

It was somewhat of a surprise to find that financial and educational levels were not prominent in their list of criteria. While most of the women talked about their preference for marrying someone “on their level”, financial standing and level of education were not their top criteria.

These women perceive that their potential mates—African American males—are not as committed to relationships and do not mature at the same rate that African American females do. Several of the women believed that African American men are not as resilient as African American females.

While the predominant view of researchers who have examined this issue seems to be that the ratio of men to women is the primary reason so many African American women are not marrying, these women provided a nuance of that concept. They acknowledge their perception that there are more women than men in their age group. But the larger problem for them is the small number of eligible men who meet their criteria. For them, the pool of available men is seriously constricted because there are so few men who meet the criteria they are looking for.

A number of the women also talked about their perception that many of the men they come in contact with are gay. This came up repeatedly in the conversations. The Black community has an uneasy relationship with homosexuality. In, One More River to Cross, Keith Boykin (1996) accuses Black women of seeing homosexuals everywhere, thus further reducing the pool of eligible men. He writes, “They see this not so much as a manhood problem but as a numbers problem” (p. 171).

African American Families

All of these young women come from strong African American families. While not all of them were raised by two biological parents; those who were raised by single parents talked about parents, grandparents and/or aunts and uncles who served as role models for them. Six of the women had strong mothers who pushed and encouraged them throughout their childhood. According to Nancy Boyd-Franklin (2003), “Many Black women place an extremely high value on motherhood. I have repeatedly found in my work with Black women that no matter how problematic their early years may have been or how much they value their careers, they feel strongly about the need to raise their children” (p. 78). The two women who did not have strong mothers as role models cited a grandmother and a father who served in that capacity.

All of these women reported growing up in secure and loving families even if their families were not the so-called “traditional” two-parent families. In addition, extended family members continue to play an essential role in their social activities and development.

Media Portrayal of African American Families

Several women talked about the way the media persists in showing African American families as low income and “broken”. One woman said the lack of portrayal of loving middle class families on the television or in movies makes it difficult for children who do not have that experience to realize there are healthy relationships in the Black community. Additionally, the media often

portrays Black women in stereotypical ways. In a recent article in The Washington Post, Teresa Wiltz (2004) discusses the way reality TV displays Black women. She talks about the “Sista With an Attitude” writing:

If you’ve ever seen a reality TV show, chances are you’ve seen her: a perpetually perturbed, tooth-sucking, eye-rolling, finger wagging harpy, creating confrontations in her wake and perceiving racial slights from the flimsiest of provocations (p. C1).

Dr. Gail Wyatt (1997) writes that Black women have historically been stereotyped as either the Sapphires that Wiltz described, sexy She-devils, sexless Mammy’s or Workhorses. “To the larger society, these personality styles typify the black woman, and, unfortunately, some black women concur, confusing stereotypes with role models to emulate” (p. 31). None of the young women in this study fit these negative stereotypical molds. These young women defy those images. They are hardworking, culturally aware and strongly concerned about the future of the African American family. They desire men who share their values and will help them build strong viable families. All eight of these young women had different personalities reflective of their different backgrounds and cannot be fit into stereotypical roles. It would be wonderful to see these inspiring women depicted in sitcoms, newspaper articles, movies and yes, even music videos as an alternative to young African American women to the negative images they too frequently see portrayed.

The Black Church

The importance of spirituality and the Black church was prominent in the interviews. Most of these women are guided by their religious beliefs and seem to have the feeling that in God, all things are possible. They desire to be with men who share these beliefs and believe that their spirituality is an essential ingredient in building a strong family. It is well known that the Black Church plays a prominent role in the Black Community. According to Latta R. Thomas (1976):

It is no riddle that Black people inside and outside the institutional Black church who are in any appreciable degree sensitive to the present Black struggle look to the Black church for words of hope and encouragement, for some workable strategies and directions, as well as for financial help (p. 133).

Even though this passage was written over thirty years ago, these young African American women continue to look to the black church for “words of hope and encouragement.” The importance of the Black church appears to be as viable for this generation as it has been for past generations.

Most of the women reported they did not have strong single role models. While they could point to women in their family or churches who were single, they expressed concern that these women were not totally fulfilled without the companionship of a lifelong partner. One woman, however, said she sees herself as a role model for younger singles and is actively involved in the singles ministry at her Church.

Study Limitations and Need for Further Study

This is the story of eight young women from two major eastern urban areas and their perceptions of marriage and being single. Their stories are a good start in beginning to look at why YHF African American women are opting out of marriage in such large numbers, particularly if it is true that most of them want to get married. These findings cannot be generalized to other YHF African American women. While the consistency of their responses was quite interesting, it is necessary that more work be done to determine the generalizability of these findings.

It would be interesting to look at a slice of young men who meet the same criteria as the women selected for this study to see how they would respond to the same focus group questions. It would also be interesting to look at a cohort of women at the 45 – 55 age range who have never married to determine their level of satisfaction with the single lifestyle. Certainly more work needs to be done in this area to determine what the impact on the African American community will be if this trend continues.

Implications for Mental Health Professionals

It is critical that mental health professionals understand and support a single lifestyle for the increasing number of women who never marry. It is also critical that we begin to reexamine our definition for family. If more and more women choose not to marry in the future, how will that change the way we view the so-called “traditional” family? What will the needs be for single parents and the children who are raised in nontraditional families?

Additionally, it is important for mental health professionals who are dealing with the African American community to examine their predispositions to the African American family. Too often our families are pathologized if they do not fit the mold of so-called traditional nuclear families. The families I discussed here represented several constellations, however, each was a loving and productive family within which these young women were able to grow and develop as high achievers even though family structures were diverse.

It is essential that all of us embrace the increasing diversity of the families we see and question any stereotypical views we have taken for granted. Mental health professionals must remain open and curious about ethnicities different from their own rather than have preconceived notions about them. In their book, The Expanded Family Life Cycle, Carter and McGoldrick (1999) discuss the need for practitioners to expand their perspectives on the diversity of families. They write:

We have to learn to frankly discuss the inequalities in our society—the racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia that are built into the system—and help clients to join together within their families to create change for themselves and then to look outward and help bring change to the community and larger society (p. 12).

On an individual level, it is imperative that professionals not assume that because a woman is in her thirties and not married that she is not living a fulfilling life. Clinicians should probe lifestyle choices to determine whether or not their clients are happy with their single status. Some will be, others will not.

The question still remains how effective young women like the ones represented in this study will be in balancing careers and family when and if they decide to marry. Clinicians who see couples will need to be sensitive to the predisposition of young women who attempt to function in traditional gender roles while also serving as major financial contributors to their families. Some may find themselves overwhelmed with attempting to be the wives their mothers and grandmothers were while at the same time working in demanding jobs.

Also, some of these YHF African American women may make a decision at some point to either have or adopt a child as a single mother. Clinicians should not make judgments about these choices or assume that a single mother raising a child is not a “family.” If present trends around marriage and divorce continue, the very nature of what constitutes a family system may change.