Analyzing the Attitudes of Black College Students on Marriage and How They Affect African American College Rates

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July 8, 2004

<u>Abstract</u>

The decline of marriage rates within the African American community is an area of concern among Black families. Academic literature provides theories and explanations of the current conditions of Black marriages in the United States and explores various concepts which explain the current state of the Black family. The following study is an analytical evaluation of a survey conducted on a sample of students at Morris College in Sumter, South Carolina during the summer of 2003. Its purpose is to determine whether the attitudes and perceptions of marriage and family held by African American college students significantly influence the rate of marriage in the black community. Concepts that were regarded in the survey were the presence/absence of roles within marriage, existing problems among married couples, marriage as a dying trend, and the urgency or desire to marry, among others. The results indicate that to advocate the marriage decline, young people are becoming more and more comfortable with the idea of cohabitation. In addition to this gradual acceptance, there shows a slowly dying desire among young African Americans to be married.

However, the study also displays that traditional beliefs and views on marriage and family still hold strong. Suggested further research might explore a detailed history of relationships and family models through qualitative measures to more accurately explain how attitudes on marriage influence motivations to be married.

Literary Review

Marriage rates among all Americans in the United States have taken a sharp decline for the last fifty years (Besharov, 2004) http://www-hoover.stanford.edu/publications/books/fulltext/colorline/95.pdf . However, this problem has become more chronic in the African American community, as in 1950 marriage rates among blacks fell almost three times behind those of whites (Besharov, 2004). Previous studies conducted on the institution of marriage have examined explanations for this deficit such as economic opportunities, spouse availability, urbanization, cultural values, and childhood socialization to name a few (Lichter, 1991; McLaughlin, 1997; Wood, 1995; Bulcroft, 1993; Glick, 1997; Staples, 1997).

One interesting concept surrounding the study Black marriages is the distorted number of compatible mates, both

economically and educationally. According to *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* marriage decline rates can be accredited to the increasing number of African American women entering middle to upper-class status and the fact that their male counterparts are falling behind (Marriage dilemma, 1997). The literature states that as more Black women earn degrees in higher education and achieve stable careers less Black men do (Marriage dilemma, 1997), creating a disproportion in the number of educationally and economically compatible mates (Marriage dilemma, 1997). Another study attempts to survey whether or not African American college women plan to marry African American men. The literature provides insight on combined perceptions of marriage, career, and family from a sample of women at a university (Porter, 1995). Though this all proves to be valuable information that vindicates some of the reasons why less and less African Americans are getting married, data is absent on the actual attitudes of marriage from African Americans in higher education.

The idea that welfare benefits discourage poor women from marrying for fear that they will not receive benefits has been offered as a viable explanation (McLaughlin, 1997). Since many poor black women receive financial aid

from the government, those women contribute to the deficit in black married couples.

Another theory provided that attempts to explain the marriage crisis is the notion that people who came from homes with disrupted marriages or divorced families were more hesitant to marry later on in life. In the textbook *Marriage and Family (fifth edition)* a study conducted on 134 college females is presented to show that those who had parents who were separated had more negative feelings about marriage, not wanting to make the same kind of mistake (Lauer, 2004). Moreover, one deficiency commonly perceived by American society about the Black family is the trend of single motherhood within the African American community. Through the persistence of this condition it becomes understood by the Black family that it is not imperative for a male to reside in the home (Staples, 1971). Overtime members of those families abandon the idea of marriage as a necessary foundation for the family.

Moreover, perhaps the most convincing reason as to why African Americans are not marrying as much anymore is the steadily increasing number of Black women who hold college degrees and attain economic stability, and the decreasing number of black men who do not. Studies have shown that more and more Black women are going to college and

attaining degrees, then pursuing careers that will place them at upper to middle class economic status (Marriage dilemma, 1997). In the same token a lower number of African American men are entering college leaving them to struggle for jobs that will ultimately keep them within lower class economics. The end result is a disproportionate number of educationally and economically compatible mates in the marriage markets of African Americans.

Thus far there are a vast number of theories that attempt to explain why the marriage rates of African Americans are dropping. The problem with focusing on just a few key concepts is the fact that so many variables have to be considered when determining the major causes for this deficit. Perhaps over time and through experience future researchers will discover more succinct areas to explore on this matter and effective methods by which to do so, that will contribute to the conclusions made on this particular topic.

Methodology

To accurately conduct this study and find meaningful results that would provide significant information to answer the question presented, a previously composed survey

that was taken about a year prior was re-evaluated for analytical review. In the summer of 2003 at Morris College in Sumter, South Carolina, a sample of sixteen African American college students, thirteen female and three male, was taken from a marriage and family summer course. They were asked to answer a questionnaire concerning opinions and views on the institutions of marriage and family, both before and after they had completed the course. Later in the summer of 2004 that survey was examined for content that would lead to predictive data on how the attitudes of those students affect the marriage markets of African Americans. A pool of nine questions were taken from the survey and probed to understand the current attitudes that black college students have toward marriage and family. The questions that were considered for evaluation were as follows:

1) Do you believe in roles within marriage? Please explain.

2) In your opinion, is there a problem within marriage in the United States? Explain.

3) Is the idea of marriage outdated? Explain.

4) Do you want to be married? Why or why not?

5) Do you believe in cohabitation? Why or why not?

6) Do you believe couples should live together before getting married?

7) In your opinion why do marriages fail?

8) Why is there such a high divorce rate in the United States?

9) Should couples divorce if they are not happy? Explain.

The answers to these questions were grouped first by either yes, no, or undecided, and then further separated by how closely related each explanation for either response was to another. Within the class, some of the students' responses began to follow a pattern, which led to the assumption of certain attitudes that began to take shape. Subsequently these attitudes were further analyzed to figure out which ones held the strongest among the sample and why. Finally the attitudes and views concerning marriage and family that emerged from the survey were compared to whether or not this particular sample showed a strong desire to be married either in the near or distant future.

Results

The results of the study were evaluated by finding a representative percentage for the answers to each question and comparing them before and after the course was completed by the sample.

For the first question, "Do you believe in roles within marriage? Please explain," 75 percent of the sample answered yes, 12.5 percent answered no, and 12.5 percent were undecided before they began the class. Of the 75 percent that answered yes, 58.3 percent believe that the presence of roles within marriage is a necessary function. Twenty-five percent of those that answered yes said that the roles should be distributed equally. And finally, 8.3 percent of those that answered yes believe that roles within marriages create successful families, while another 8.3 percent believes that those roles have to be traditional gender roles in order for the family to function. Of the 12.5 percent that answered no to the question of roles, half believe that a marriage should be conducted as a partnership while the other half said that each party in a marriage should have responsibilities rather than play roles.

After the course was completed, the class' perceptions of roles did slightly change. Only 50 percent answered yes to whether there existed roles within marriages while 12.5 percent answered no and a significant 37.5 percent were undecided. Of those that answered yes, 37.5 percent said that roles were necessary for a successful relationship. Twenty-five percent said that roles establish organization

within the relationship, while another 25 percent said that roles had to be equally distributed among the parties. Lastly 12.5 percent believe that traditional gender roles should be present. The entire 12.5 percent that answered no to the existence of roles said that a relationship should be a partnership and should have teamwork.

The next question to be analyzed was "In your opinion, is there a problem with marriages in the United States? Explain." As a response, 87.5 percent of the class answered yes and 12.5 percent answered no. Of those that answered yes, 35.7 said that people are getting married for the wrong reasons. The theory that marriage is no longer taken seriously was supported by 28.6 percent of the sample. Another 14.3 percent said that there was a lack of both trust and commitment in relationships. Then 7.1 percent said that there was a loss of values and that no one is perfect.

By the end of the course the entire class agreed that there existed problems within marriages in the U.S. However, their opinions for what those problems were varied. The largest portion, 31.3 percent, believed that marriages don't last anymore because there is no commitment. The second largest group, 25 percent said that marriage is no longer taken seriously. Changing values

towards marriage and family was the explanation given by 18.8 percent. Another 12.5 percent said that the biggest problem with marriages that the high divorce rate and the fact that divorces are so easy to attain. To finish one 6.3 percent said that men are never satisfied to explain the problem with marriages while another 6.3 percent that the purpose of marriage is misunderstood.

The question, "Is the idea of marriage outdated? Explain," was examined next. From the sample, 18.8 percent responded yes, 68.8 percent responded no, and 12.5 percent were undecided. Of the portion that said yes, 66.7 percent said that changing times led to marriage becoming while 33.3 percent said that young people were beginning to focus more on their education. Of those that answered no, 27.3 percent said that marriage could not be outdated since people are still getting married, and another 27.3 percent said that marriage was still an ideal life goal. One 18.2 percent said that marriage is not outdated but just needs to be modified while another 18.2 percent said that children still indeed need to be raised in two-parent homes. Then 9.1 percent said that marriage is fundamental for society.

Following completion of the course a few members of the class had changed their opinions on whether marriage

was outdated. By then 31.3 percent responded yes, 50 percent responded no, and 18.8 percent were undecided. Of those that answered yes, 60 percent explained that evolving values and the fact that people were becoming increasingly comfortable with the idea of cohabitation as to why marriages are outdated. Twenty percent gave changing times as an explanation to why marriage was outdated and another 20 percent said that the fact that women were engaged in demanding careers was the reason why. Of those that responded no, 50 percent said that people were still getting married but they were just waiting until later in their lives than normal. Twenty-five percent argued that marriage is still tradition in American society. At last one 12.5 percent said that people do want to be married only they do not want to commit and another 12.5 percent said that marriage is not outdated because people do not want to be lonely.

The following question that was analyzed was, "Do you want to be married? Why or why not?" Prior to the course, 81.3 percent answered yes, 6.3 percent answered no, and 12.5 percent were undecided. Of the fairly large percent that answered yes, 46.2 percent claimed that they wanted to share their lives with someone as the reason why they wanted to get married, 30.8 percent said that they wanted

to enjoy the experience of being married, and 15.4 percent said that they feared loneliness. A very small 7.7 percent declared that the fact that marriage indicated the ability to cooperate was the reason why they desired to be married. The 6.3 percent that answered no said that they were unable to trust and therefore could not get married.

Succeeding the course attitudes shifted significantly. Only 62.5 percent of the sample responded yes, compared to 81.3 percent before the course, and 25 percent responded no in contrast to a mere 6.3 percent. A 12.5 percent remained undecided. Of those that said yes, 60 percent said that they wanted a lifetime partner, or someone to share their lives with. Fear of loneliness claimed 10 percent of the sample, as well as the longing to experience longevity in a relationship and the conception of marriage as a vessel of spiritual freedom. From the portion that said no, 50 percent said that marriage was too much of a hassle and too much hard work, while one 25 percent said that they were unable to trust and another 25 percent said that they enjoyed the freedom of single life.

"Do you believe in cohabitation? Why or why not?" was the following question to observe. In the initial survey 37.5 percent replied yes, 50 percent replied no, and 12.5 percent were undecided. Of those that answered yes, 83.3

percent contended that they wanted to learn more about their partners before committing to them. The remaining 16.7 percent said that unconditional love would allow cohabitation whether the desire to marry was present or not. From the sample that answered no, 37.5 percent said that in the event of cohabitation a couple loses work commitment and their will to marry, meanwhile weakening the relationship as a whole. One 12.5 percent said that cohabitation was the "incorrect" way to foster a relationship, a second 12.5 percent said that people should be married upon moving out of their childhood homes, and a third 12.5 percent gave no explanation for why they did not believe in cohabitation.

In the second survey attitudes were altered upon completion of the course. As a response, 56.3 percent said that they did believe in cohabitation in tandem to 43.8 percent that said no. Of those that do believe in cohabitation, 66.7 percent explained that they wanted to learn more about their partners before committing. Interestingly enough 11.1 percent claimed that some people do not want to be married but they do not want to live alone either. Another 11.1 percent said that they believe in short-term cohabitation conditions and yet another 11.1 percent said that cohabitation is a good method for

learning the processes of marriage before actually getting married. Those members of the sample that answered no had three different explanations. The idea that cohabitation would dilute a relationship and later create problems that would lead to its end was offered by one 42.9 percent, while another 42.9 percent said that there would be no need to get married if two people were already living together. The remaining 14.3 percent simply claimed that they did not condone "shacking up", or intimately living with another person.

The next question asked to the sample was equivalent to the one before it, just worded differently. In regards to the question "Do you believe couple should live together before getting married?" 50 percent said yes, 43.8 percent said no, and 6.3 percent were undecided. Seventy-five percent of those that said yes said that they again wanted to learn more about their partner, and the other 25 percent said that they wanted to test the waters before getting married. Of those that said no, 57.7 percent gave no explanation why. One 14.3 percent said that it should be avoided, another 14.3 percent said that it leads to a lack of commitment, and the other 14.3 percent said that it leads to trouble in the relationship.

Looking at the subsequent survey there was little variation. As a reply 56.3 percent answered yes and 45.8 percent answered no. From the portion that responded yes, 55.6 percent said that they wanted to get to know their mate. Also one 22.2 percent said that they thought people should only live together short-term if not married, and the second 22.2 percent said that it would allow pre-exposure to marriage conditions. In the group that countered no, 85.7 percent provided no explanation for their reasoning while 14.3 percent expressed that there would be no need to get married of already living together.

The following two questions that were evaluated did not provide a concrete yes or no response. Instead these questions required the subjects to offer a generalized perception on a particular issue within marriages. To provide useful data, the most common attitudes were recorded. In the first question, "In your opinion why do marriages fail?" 56.3 percent said that marriage failure was due to lack of communication, 31.3 percent said that it was lack of trust, 25 percent believed that it was due to financial problems, and another 25 percent argued that marriages fail due to lack of discipline to work it out. These views were all held prior to taking the course.

After the course was completed those attitudes did change mildly. The most accepted reason for why marriages failed was a lack of trust in the relationship which claimed 43.8 percent. Lack of communication and lack of commitment were dispositions both held by at least 37.5 percent and 25 percent said that because people marry for the wrong reasons their unions do not last.

The next question asked "Why is there such a high divorce rate in the U.S.?" Before the course there were many varying reasons for why so many marriages ended in divorce but there were only two rationales that stand out. The fact that people marry for the wrong reasons was the opinion held by 37.5 percent and 31.3 percent said that excessive divorce is on account of the fact that divorces are easy to get and that they do not require people to work within their marriages.

Later in the second survey the same two reasons held strong among the sample only attitudes shifted a bit. Instead more people believed that the high divorce rate is caused by how easy they are to attain and the absence of work commitment. That perception was presented by 43.8 percent of the sample. Only 25 percent still reasoned that excessive divorce in the U.S. occurs as a result of couples marrying for the wrong reasons.

The final question that was analyzed in the survey was "Should couples divorce if they are not happy? Explain." Previous to taking the course, 43.8 percent of the class said yes while 56.3 percent said no. Of those that said yes, 71.4 percent suggested that people should divorce and find happiness elsewhere. One 14.3 percent said that people should divorce only as a last resort and the other 14.3 percent said that couples should alleviate all emotional pain and strain by breaking up if unhappy. The entire portion of the sample that answered no encouraged couples to stick with their relationships, and suggested that they work out their problems.

Upon completion of the course, the opinions of the class had not changed much at all. As a reply to whether couples should divorce if unhappy, 37.5 percent answered yes, 56.3 percent answered no, and 6.3 percent was undecided. The reasons were still roughly the same for why couples should or should not get divorced. From the sample that answered yes, 66.7 percent suggested that people find happiness elsewhere, 16.7 percent said to divorce in order to avoid mistakes later, and 16.7 percent said that unhappy couples should divorce so that they are not wasting their time in an unwanted relationship.

In summary it is safe to say that most of the attitudes held by the students before they began the marriage and family summer course endured and were the same at the end. However perceptions for two significant questions did alter considerably throughout the course of the class. The desire to be married made a negative 18.8 percent shift from yes to no, while belief in cohabitation claimed an extra 18.8 percent of the sample, in the opposite direction of yes, after the class was complete. But overall the views of the representative sample remained consistent.

Discussion

The outcome of this analytical evaluation roughly shows that African American college students maintain pretty basic and standard views on black marriages and families. It also shows that over time, some of those attitudes change very little or not at all. Yet the question that this research aimed to answer, are marriage rates in the African American community affected by the opinions of Black college students, is not answered concretely and without bias. Though the evaluation does offer some vital information that may effectively contribute to this field of research, it excludes a number

of variables that may have led to greater success of the study.

The study shows that more people were unwilling to get married, and that more people were in favor of cohabitation prior to the summer course than afterward. However, the study also displayed that less than half of the sample supported divorce among unhappy couples while the majority encouraged those couples to compromise and work their problems out. Do these findings present the theory that college students are unwilling to get married because they are becoming increasingly more comfortable with living together unmarried, or does the research offer the concept that college students refrain from getting married because they are wising up to the amount of work it takes to maintain a happy marriage and family? Although one social scientist might argue that it is either one or the other, perhaps a more receptive sociologist will confirm that the study proves both arguments to be true. The data presented by the assessment is so limited that it cannot provide conclusive theories by which to accredit the marriage crisis. To enhance the effectiveness of this research, a number of variables could be modified. For one, the sample probably needs to be a bit more diverse than just sixteen college students that attend a historical black college.

The number should be increased to between fifty and one hundred, and for all intensive purposes, the ethnic backgrounds should extend outside the African American community. Also other personal aspects should be taken into account when analyzing the data granted by the sample. Details like age, family background, economic status, and perhaps religious orientation should be taken into account as well as those considered in this particular study.

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