BARRIERS TO MARRIAGE and PARENTHOOD

FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN MEN & WOMEN

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Introduction

The absence of African American fathers in the home is seen as a primary factor of the insidious deterioration of African American families. These missing men are thought to be at the root of family disorganization and dysfunction. This ideology is often adopted without taking into account the rampant inequity, racial discrimination and legal difficulties that often create insurmountable barriers to marriage and fatherhood. Policy intended to promote marriage often suggests that the reason so many African American men and women do not marry is due to personal choice, rather than poverty, unemployment or other economic or social barriers that inhibit marriage. It is the purpose of this paper to explore some of these barriers and their impact upon marriage, parenthood and family stability as well as to review some of the current research, marriage education initiatives and social policy designed to address the problem.

There is a myth surrounding the role of African American fathers and their place within the family that unfortunately, often depicts the typical African American Family as being devoid of husbands and fathers. Young African American men are usually depicted as undependable, uncommitted to marriage, prone to engage in violent, corrupt behaviors, and/or physically absent due to abandonment or incarceration (Fiske, 2003). Cast as uninvolved fathers by media, society and current public policy, low income African American men encounter multiple barriers in their efforts to synchronize work and family participation (Roy, 2005). Roopnarine, Lamb, Fouts & Lewis, Elligan (2004) note that much of the research on the role of African American males within the family

tends to focus on low income groups, depicting the males as lacking in investment or participation in child rearing.

Our society forms many of their dominant ideologies about social problems as a result of heavy media influence. Intensive focus on negative images of predominately African American poor urban communities tends to perpetuate stereotypes and provide a misleading portrayal of low income African American Families (Kozol, 1992). Inner City African American families are often subjected to harsh living conditions. Many inner city communities suffer the gravest of indignities brought about by abject poverty resulting in few educational or employment opportunities. Barriers brought about by such depravation certainly inhibit a person's marriagability.   Outcomes for families are often poor for those living within such afflicted areas. Few options exist creating a sense of utter hopelessness, low self esteem and increasing the possibility of criminal involvement as a means to survive. Berkman & Blunk (1992) note that the economic inequalities within society work to destroy self worth and self-dignity within the African American poor population. As a means to survive, many resort to crime with devastating consequences such as incarceration.   After their release, many men find that diminished job prospects may permanently impair their marriagability, (Coontz, Folbre, 2002). African American men have the second highest rate of unemployment, second only to Native Americans. Limited opportunities and lack of positive role models have also contributed to their absence from the community and home (Fiske, 2003).   Many of these young men have grown up in single parent, (usually female headed) households. Anderson (1999) notes that the majority of families within impoverished sections of the

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inner city are single mothers with children. She may live with her mother or other relatives, usually other females with their children.   Lacking appropriate adult male role models, young men often fail to learn how to relate to women or to their children. They grow up with a skewed sense of what it means to be a husband or father (Fiske, 2003).

Positive male role models are virtually non-existent within many inner city communities. Many young African American men have had limited or no personal experience with a stable father figure and have little to model themselves on. They play the role of father and family provider poorly, because of their lack of exposure and narrow perspective on what it means to be a partner or parent (Anderson, 1999). The greatest barrier that African American Families face is the shocking absence of African American adult males within the community (Fiske, 2003). Lacking positive male role models, combined with the severe environmental stressors (unemployment, lack of educational resources or few available opportunities to make a legitimate living wage) increase the risk that they may resort to a violent and crime ridden existence simply to survive, resulting in possible incarceration or early death (Anderson. 1999).

Empirical work that focused on the role of the African American family often portrayed the male in a negativistic manner, failing to provide adequate discussion of the environmental stressors and psychosocial barriers that low income African American families endure. The social and economic contexts of inner city family life are ignored and/or misinterpreted. African American men are often vilified and framed in a negativistic light. A recent study by Lane, Keefe, Rubinstein, Levandowski, Freedman, Rosenthal, Cibula and Czerwinski (2004) examines the current plight of African

American Families and barriers to marriage and parenthood. Research reveals that the declining marriage rate for African American women is most likely due to the scarcity of marriageable men and the disproportionate sex ratio within the African American population.   The research further shows that the sharp rise in single motherhood since 1965 through 2000 is not due to personal choice, but rather the effect of structural violence. Lack of educational and/or employment opportunities inhibit marriageability.

The African American male-female sex ratio disparity is highest between the ages of 25 – 29, when for every two African American men there are nearly three African American women. Lane, et al (2004) note, heterosexual, monogamous marriage is thus an arithmetical impossibility for one third of African American women in this age group, if they want marital partners of near age and same race. Overwhelmingly, incarceration is the largest factor that accounts for this skewed male-female sex ratio among African American men and women.

Researchers have frequently theorized that sporadic employment leads to disengaged family involvement for low-income African American men. Low-income women often do not consider men with unstable work histories to be worth a lifetime commitment. Successful fatherhood has hinged on men's stable and consistent participation in both work and family life (Roy, 2005).   With limited opportunities to fulfill the provider role for their families, African American men have had few opportunities to open the door to other forms of familial involvement as parents or partners.   Failure as providers has harmed fulfillment of other roles in the lives of African American men, such as the regular involvement with their children (Roy, 2005).

Research suggests that African American men, as with men from all ethnicities, in fact, desire marriage. (James, Tucker, Mitchell-Kernan, (1996).   Married men derive a high level of well-being, more so than never married singles or divorced males. However, among African American women, only about 70 percent born after 1950 will marry and those who do marry will face increased chances for divorce (Besharov and West, 2001). Considering the shortage of marriageable African American men, marriage unions between African American men and women are in serious decline, with a reversal of this trend unlikely in the near future. If they marry, the high rates of divorce among this population are indicative of the severe stressors (poverty, high unemployment, etc.) that interfere in the lives of these families, jeopardizing the health of the marriage.

Child Welfare Outcomes.

Over the past 20 years, a body of research has developed which focuses upon changes in patterns of family structure and the subsequent effect on children. Many researchers believe that, on average, children do best when raised by their two *married, biological parents* who have low-conflict relationships (Parke, 2003). Children who grow up in single parent households are placed at increased risk on many levels. Often, these children are living marginal lives that are the direct consequence of abject poverty. Family structures and forms have become extremely varied over the past 30 years, not only as a result of the high rate of divorce and the proliferation of complex stepfamilies but also because of increasing rate of single parent headed households. Consequently, the share of children residing with two biological married parents has been steadily declining (Brown, 2004).   Twenty two percent of African American children were living

in single parent homes in 1960. By 2001, the percentage had more than doubled to 53 percent (Parke, 2003). 45 % of children raised by divorced mothers and 69% raised by never married mothers live in or near the poverty level (King, 1999). As they enter adolescence, life for African American males continues to become increasingly more difficult. A recent study shows that inner city African American adolescent males lack future goals, interests and felt they had no opportunity to break through social and racial barriers. African American males are disproportionately represented on negative societal indices, such as crime and violence (Honora, 2002).   Such barriers become increasingly more difficult to overcome as they enter early adulthood. (Fiske, 2003).

   Impact of Existing Marriage Policy.

   Existing policies to promote marriage among African American couples are often flawed and racially biased.   Faced with an increasing proportion of single African American mothers, social policy discourse has grown more strident in recent years, favoring marriage promotion policy as a means to end poverty. However, social policy has not adequately addressed the issues that impede marriage among many African American couples. Marriage promotion policies construct the monogamous, male-female marriage as the ideal norm and attempt to advance marriage by stigmatizing women who are not married or who choose not to marry, (Lane et al, 2004).   In their research of divorce and family change (Dunning & Hughes (2005) found that personal economic stability is a prerequisite for marriage. This stability is fragile, dependent upon the availability of available economic opportunities.

One of the stated objectives of welfare legislation passed in 1996 was to end dependency by promoting marriage. In 2002, the Bush Administration linked the population of low-income families receiving government support with marriage by introducing incentives for states to prioritize marriage promotion as a solution to poverty. Such policy serves only to reflect the popular assumption that failure to marry, rather than unemployment, lack of educational opportunities and lack of resources, such as affordable daycare for low income families, is the primary cause of child poverty. (Coontz & Folbre, 2002). This solution is strategically aligned with TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) (McClintock-Comeaux, Anderson & Kuvalanka, 2004). The TANF program requires states to meet a 90 percent work participation rate for two parent families or risk federal financial penalties. Remembering the major barriers to marriage and parenting for African American men are lack of educational opportunities and few job opportunities which pay a living wage, it is easy to begin to see the cycle that entraps African American men from becoming marriageable. Roy (2005) notes that social policies targeted at low income families begin with an assumption of fathers as providers for families, these men have been placed at the center of the welfare debate over financial support. However, it may be more accurate to evaluate men who struggle to find a place in the local workforces as dead broke and not deadbeat fathers. Bayus (2002) notes that for many African American men, mainstream societal normative pathways to obtaining jobs and education are simply not available to them. This impedes there ability to move toward economic viability. Current marriage policy is based upon the assumptions that marriage will reduce poverty

and provide economic stability along with the assumption that children who do not reside within an intact two parent family will be at risk due to poverty.   However, current pro marriage policy is misguided in that non marriage among African American men and women is often due to poverty and economic instability; economic stability matters when couples decide whether to marry or not and even two parent families are not immune to the stressors of economic instability that inevitably place children at risk. (Coontz & Folbre, 2002). Recent research finds that many women remain single, even after having children, due to issues surrounding economic and emotional considerations. Many women will not marry a man if he cannot provide an adequate income or if his presence places further economic or emotional burdens upon the family (Edin, 2000).   Marriage promotion policies simply do not acknowledge or address the barriers to marriage that many African American men and women face. Policy is implemented under the assumption that marriage, in and of itself, will solve the problems of poverty and social dysfunction among low-income African American families (Lane, et al 2004). Clearly, there is a disconnect between what the architects of current marriage promotion policy perceive and the lived realities of many African American families.

Marriage Education for Low Income African American families.

Current research convincingly shows that marriage is not only desirable for most men and women; it also improves quality of life in a myriad of ways (King, 1999). Children also develop much better in intact, low conflict families and experience better outcomes overall than do children raised in single parent headed households. So how then, can marriage education initiatives reach marginalized families who eke out

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their existence on the fringes of society?   First, obtaining a fundamental understanding

of the barriers and problems that African American families face is essential, along with a

basic understanding, at least in part, of the cultural context of the people to be served.

Successful implementation of marriage education programs among low-income families

requires that program facilitators must be respectful of and responsive to such issues as

race, ethnicity, multiple family structures and cultural competence (McClintock-

Comeaux, et al 2004).   Low income African American males however, can be an

extremely difficult population to target for marriage or relationship education. When one

is tasked with simple day-to-day survival, these young men may perceive an educational

program geared toward being a good partner/husband as an absurd idea.   Perhaps

identification of at risk youth, while they still attend school is one way to begin pro-

active interventions with a captive audience. This would require implementation and

teaching of relationship education much earlier - young to middle adolescents.

Modification of such programs as " The Art of Loving Well" (Ellenwood, 1996),

"Connections" (Kamper, 1996) or "Building Relationships", (Olson, Defrain & Olson,

1999), which are specifically designed to target teenage populations might be

considered.   When dealing with low-income African American youth, modifications to

existing curriculum should be culturally competent and coherent, addressing the barriers

unique to this population. Lacking racial or socio economic sensitivity will jeopardize

successful implementation of the program. For instance, inner city youth face vastly

different stressors than youth from more affluent communities; hence, their methods of

resolving conflict or their perception of relationships will differ accordingly. Methods or

education models designed for the middle class white suburban youth may not make sense to inner city African American youth and ultimately be rejected. Successfully reaching the population requires that curriculum and educational content be modified to be a "good fit". Authors, teachers and facilitators must "speak the language" of inner city youth, have a good grasp of the barriers that exist and modify the program accordingly. Low income older adolescents and young adults will be best served by having relationship and marriage education integrated into a more comprehensive program aimed at continuing their education, getting employment assistance, addressing existing substance abuse or mental health issues, negotiate challenges related to child rearing, etc. (Ooms & Wilson, 2004).

Marriage or Relationship education programs designed for adults might also be similarly modified to address specific ethnic, cultural or socio economic populations. However, considering the barriers, life stressors and day-to-day struggle to survive that low income urban African American men and women face, traditional marriage education programs might not be appropriate. Gaining some understanding of culturally based pride-shame issues prevalent to the relationship along with having empathy for this population's oppression and their sense of survival are key elements to understanding their barriers to marriage and parenthood (Hardy & Laszloffy, 2002). Recently, however, marriage education programs such as the PREPARE/ENRICH Program (Olson, Druckman & Fournier, 2000) have been modified to address the barriers and challenges of low income couples. For instance, all participants are now given referral information about services to address financial problems, substance abuse, mental health and

domestic violence, (Ooms & Wilson, 2004). Such initiatives are essential in reaching

this target population. Providing immediate services that meet participants needs as a

way of engaging them is helpful, for instance, fatherhood programs have been able to

involve men in parenting education and support groups by initially offering the help that

they most desperately want – namely, job training and placement and assistance with

child support and legal issues, (Ooms & Wilson, 2004).

   Due to the paucity of current research that addresses the outcomes of such

modified marriage education programs, it is difficult to assess their effectiveness at this

time. However, the modifications to the PREPARE/ENRICH curriculum and other

Marriage or Relationship education programs designed to address the needs of low

income African American families appear to be sound, ethical and competent and will

hopefully provide some hope to many beleaguered families.

Conclusion/Implications:

This discussion has placed heavy emphasis on the barriers to marriage and

fatherhood that African American men face – social stigma and racism that blocks

educational and/or employment opportunities for African American youth, both male and

female along with structural violence and racism in social policy.

Understanding the barriers and the cultural context of this population (e.g.

impoverished neighborhoods, lack of employment opportunities, drug addictions,

children having been placed in foster care) will assist in the flow of needs assessment and

subsequent action to find appropriate resources for these families. Being poor, regardless

of race or cultural background brings with it a host of factors that place enormous stress

on relationships in ways that scholars are only beginning to explore, (Ooms & Wilson, 2004).   Marriage and Relationship education programs can be modified to meet the unique needs of this population and should be culturally relevant for low-income African American families.   The PREPARE/ENRICH curriculum and training is gradually being modified to reflect some of the challenges that low-income individuals and couples face disproportionately. Although marriage and relationship education will not solve the psychosocial problems of low income African American families, if tailored to the diverse needs and circumstances of low-income individuals, it may make an important difference in their lives. Couples who desire marriage should be helped to overcome barriers and receive the supports and assistance necessary to accomplish this goal, (Ooms & Wilson, 2004).

Further research should continue to explore the characteristics and circumstances which act as barriers to African American men becoming more effective in their roles as husbands and fathers, and should also serve to further explore key factors (including poorly constructed social policy) which inhibit marriage among African American couples.

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