

CHAPTER

1

African American Marriages at the Intersection

Challenges, Strengths, and Resilience

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With the visibility of the presidency, Barack and Michelle Obama have created a renewed focus on African American marriages in the United States (Chaney & Fairfax, 2013). In many ways, they have dispelled negative myths about African American relationships. Their highly publicized date nights, having the First Lady's mother come to live with them to help with child rearing, and negotiating family with career obligations are all considerations of contemporary African American marriages. Their visible relationship, negotiations, and struggles are a part of the lives of many African American married couples that have not often been discussed. African American families and communities greatly benefit from marriage, yet these important stories are often left untold. As a result, while challenges to marriage in the African American community are often noted, the strengths and promise of these marriages are often left unexplored in the literature. Creating a discourse that highlights the good and acknowledges the challenges from both historical and contemporary contexts is important to providing a more complete picture of marriage in the African American community. A one-sided dialogue does little to advance knowledge and understanding of any

population. It actually does more harm than good, painting an incomplete—and often stereotypical—picture. This book explores the challenges, strengths, and promise of marriage within the African American community.

BY GRACE: THE MEANING BEHIND THE TITLE

This book is not a theological examination of marriage in the African American community, and I am certainly not a theologian. However, it is important to understand the title of the book and its connection to African American marriage. To do so, one must first understand what is meant by *grace*. There is a saying: “There but for the grace of God go I.” This statement starts with the premise that one does not earn grace. You do not receive it for something you have or have not done. You cannot build up points and use them later. Instead, grace is something that God gives. The unknown author that coined the aforementioned phrase was essentially saying that through God’s favor and mercy one is able to transcend challenges and obstacles with success. This success cannot then be fully attributed to what you have or have not done. According to the U.S. Guinness Book of World Records, the longest married couple was Herbert and Zelmyra Fisher of New Bern, North Carolina (Sawyer, 2013). The couple had been married for 86 years until Herbert’s death in 2011. This African American couple had been married through the Great Depression, three wars, the Civil Rights Movement, and 15 presidents. When asked for the secret to the longevity of their marriage, Mrs. Fisher said, “There isn’t any secret. It was only God that kept us together” (Hendricks, 2011). Their experience reinforces the idea that, for many African Americans, marriage is rooted in grace. “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God” (Ephesians 2:8–9 [New King James Version]). The Fishers were religious people but not within the same denomination. They had an interfaith marriage in which they worshipped in different churches. However, the acknowledgment of grace was the centerpoint of this 86-year marriage. There is another scripture that says “Faith without works is dead” (James 2:26). The Fishers also acknowledged that they had to make the choice to be committed, to honor and love each other, to be respectful, and to treat each other with kindness. In summary, the title for this book is purposeful and important. *By Grace* stands as a reminder that, despite the challenges experienced in black marriages, there is also hope and there are great examples of black marriages that serve as models. While there are specific tools and tasks that can be learned to make marriages healthy and sustainable, the presence of *grace* continues to be acknowledged as a thriving element of successful marriages.

AFRICAN AMERICAN MARRIAGE: AN OVERVIEW

The importance of marriage in the African American community has been examined in this book. Collectively, these chapters largely identify the historical and

contemporary challenges that confront marriage in the African American community. The impact of racism on the functioning of black marriages has been noted (Aldridge, 2008; Bernard, 1966; Franklin, 2000; Jewell, 2003; Johnson & Staples, 2005; McAdoo, 2007). From the enslavement of African people to Jim Crow, to the persistence of institutionalized injustice, racism, and oppression, there are real barriers that continue to affect the inner workings of African American relationships. Whether it is being forced to negotiate the lack of, or limited access to, quality health care or the disproportionate number of incarcerated male African Americans in the criminal justice system, there are circumstances that affect mate selection, how couples interact with each other, and how individuals deal with the multiple stressors in their lives and within the context of their relationship. Therefore, the persistence of racism across generations and in everyday life is an important backdrop to understanding challenges that many African American couples navigate, even when they do not articulate oppression and discrimination as the primary issue. Much consideration has been given to understanding how these issues connect with gender inequality, sexism, and gender conflict within African American relationships. These challenges are rooted in the Faustian bargain that was an agreement between black men and white men at the dawn of emancipation.

The Faustian bargain struck by white and black men—designating the black man as head of household, allocating him higher wages, and giving him authority over black women in exchange for their labor in the fields—was the first signal after emancipation of the erosion of gender relationships in the African American community. The developments that followed this historic pact between black and white males were not surprising. Black women who had worked side by side with their husbands as equals had difficulty accepting their husbands' newly appointed role as patriarch and taskmaster. (Franklin, 2000, pp. 51–52)

It is critical to understand the historical context of how the Faustian bargain affected marriage and relationships among male and female African Americans. With the Faustian bargain, there was a decrease in black women's desire to marry, causing marriage rates to decline. It should be noted that, throughout the enslavement of African people, black people did all they could to marry and preserve their relationships (Bernard, 1966). However, with the creation of this agreement, there was a decline in marriage due, in large part, to a structured arrangement that was rooted in gender inequality and sexism. The rate of domestic violence also increased (Franklin, 2000). Black women were faced with the challenge of having to reveal the violence and be seen as unsupportive of black men or suppress their experiences and be viewed as a good wife, mother, and steward of the community. This challenge persists today (Bent-Goodley, 2012). Also, the notion that women were responsible for maintaining the home, working outside of the home, and quietly supporting their spouse regardless of the man's transgressions began to take root and was encapsulated as the black woman's "cult of true womanhood" (Franklin,

2000). The idea that women should “grin and bear it” was then reinforced by broader societal expectations and the institutionalization of patriarchy both within and outside of the black community. These ideas continue to persist and pervade African American relationships. They affect mate selection, communication patterns, perceptions of self within relationships, the desire to be married, and ideas about what it means to be in a committed relationship and what it takes to secure that relationship (Aldridge, 2008; Bent-Goodley, 2004; Chapman, 2007; Jewell, 2003). Despite this, marital rates were still high in the African American community and really did not begin to decline until 30 years ago. African American marriage, therefore, cannot fully be understood without having a sense of the historical context that has shaped these marriages. However, despite the challenges, just like the enduring marriage of Herbert and Zelmyra Fisher, African American marriages have thrived and continue to serve as an anchor in the black community. Acknowledging the intersection of challenges that affect these marriages while identifying the strengths that allow them to transcend obstacles allows us to better understand the opportunities or the promise that lay ahead.

The Challenges

A number of challenges affect African American relationships. These challenges are not unique to African Americans and African American relationships, but they do disproportionately affect the African American community. These issues intersect to become especially damaging to advancing African American marriages and relationships (Blackman, Clayton, Glenn, Malone-Colon, & Roberts, 2005). African Americans are more likely than any other racial group to be unmarried (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). Not even half of adult African Americans are married (41 percent), compared with 60 percent of white Americans and 60 percent of Latinos. Black couples are more likely to divorce when compared with white couples—23 divorces per 1,000 black couples and 19 per 1,000 white couples. The number of African American unmarried women with children is 44 percent of African American families compared with white unmarried women at 13 percent of white families (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). These statistics are a marked difference from the number of black couples that chose to marry prior to the 1980s, when the decline became more pronounced. This trend, however, began to emerge in the 1950s. Between 1950 and 1980, black female-headed households went from 17.6 to 37.8 percent of black families, compared with white female-headed households going from 8.5 to 11.2 percent, respectively (Bent-Goodley, 2003; Franklin, 2000). With these challenges has come a decrease in marital satisfaction (Malone-Colon, 2007). However, in a survey of African Americans ages 19 to 35, more than three quarters (77 percent) still had a desire to get married and according to a 2006 Gallup Poll, African Americans are more likely than white Americans to be able to identify the importance of being married.

These statistics are a reflection of other challenges confronting African American relationships. Economic inequality and wealth inequity are pervasive

issues that have had a generational impact on African American relationships (Conley, 2009; Davis & Bent-Goodley, 2004; Mincy & Hillard, 2003). Poverty is also an issue that has had a disproportionate impact in the black community (Isaacs, 2007). These issues lead to financial strain, which is at the center of many divorces and marital strife (Chaney, 2009; Isaacs, 2007; Malone-Colon, 2007). Financial matters affect mate selection; the quality of relationships; and the decision to marry, not to marry, or to stay married. Further discussion in this book will illuminate these issues more fully.

Violence against black women is also a major challenge. Black women experience one of the highest rates of physical and sexual victimization compared with other groups of women (Potter, 2008; Violence Policy Center, 2010). This violence affects current and future relationships and even generations of men and women who witness the abuse (Bent-Goodley, 2012; Hughes, 2004). Still, many black women are encouraged to stay in these relationships, just as they were when the Faustian bargain became a reality.

HIV/AIDS has illuminated relationship issues in the black community as well. It is not a question of simply practicing safer sex; the fact that African American women are disproportionately more likely to become infected with HIV/AIDS is a reflection of broader issues (El-Bassel, Caldeira, Ruglass, & Gilbert, 2009). Many black women may be fully aware of the importance of practicing safer sex; however, they may not be comfortable telling a partner to use proper safer sex techniques for fear of losing the person (Bent-Goodley, 2014). They may have been forced to engage in unsafe sex practices as a result of domestic violence (Josephs & Abel, 2009; Lipsky, Caetano, Field, & Larkin, 2006). These women may also believe that they are in a monogamous relationship and feel that they do not need to use any protection for that reason (Bent-Goodley, 2014). The majority of black women who become infected with HIV experience this through heterosexual transmission. It is vital that we understand the vast pressures that many African American women experience to be in a relationship, particularly with the number of eligible African American men being viewed as dwindling. These are just some of the issues that pose major challenges to the sustenance and the initiation of healthy relationships and marriage in the African American community.

The Strengths

Compared with unmarried African Americans, those that are married have larger incomes and are less likely to be poor (Addo & Lichter, 2013; Malone-Colon, 2007). They also report better family functioning, such as stronger parenting outcomes, higher self-esteem, and fewer behavioral problems among their children (Pollack et al., 2013; Yeung & Conley, 2008). Reasons for these benefits include creating a sense of permanence and improving parental support and balance. Married African Americans use strengths within the black experience to transcend the challenges (Hill, 1997; Martin & Martin, 1995). The strengths of black families include the use of extended family, the power of mutual aid networks, and the use of spirituality to address everyday problems (Billingsley,

1994; Carlton-LaNey, 2001; Hill, 1997; Martin & Martin, 2003). Extended family networks provide a powerful intergenerational focus on the need to preserve the community through the strength of the family. Families continue to provide caregiving and receive support from grandparents and older family members. This critical resource of extended family serves as a powerful source of mutual aid that supports marriage, either through providing respite care, sharing examples of how to sustain a marriage, or by reinforcing the importance of marriage in the black community.

The community often provides support for these relationships by sanctioning the viability of marriage within the community (Billingsley, 2003). Some argue that recent years have seen a deterioration of the necessity of marriage in the black community and a perceived normalization of single motherhood within the community. However, the desire to be married persists in the African American community. Organizational supports continue to actively reinforce African American marriages. These organizational supports or mutual aid networks often center on the family unit but also highlight the union of marriage. For example, Jack and Jill of America, Inc., has provided informal support to African American families since its inception in 1938. This organization, founded to support the development of middle-class black children, also provides time for men, women, and couples to bond and create informal support networks. This informal, mutual aid network is important to the sustenance of African American marriages. These types of organizations represent one of the strengths of black marriages.

African American faith-based communities continue to stress the importance of marriage using scripture and sermons to reinforce marriage as an institution (Brade & Bent-Goodley, 2009; Franklin & Boddie, 2004; Marks & Chaney, 2006). The power of the pulpit continues to be strong in the African American family. Having regular direct and indirect messages of the importance of African American marriage is a critical strength. In addition to messages from the pulpit, there are marriage and couple's ministries that provide retreats, meetings, access to local resources, recreational activities, and skills-building workshops for African American couples. The long-term commitment rooted in having taken religious vows plays a major role in supporting African American marriages, and the sanctity of the union is reinforced within the faith community. In addition to these religious mechanisms, the use of spirituality in maintaining the relationship and persevering during difficult times is also a critical anchor for African American married couples. Through utilization of these religious and spiritual networks, African American married couples are anchored in this cultural strength as a significant mechanism of support.

The Promise

African American marriage advocates stress the importance of increasing dialogue and the visibility of African American marriage. There is also a need to increase effective marriage education programs that target African Americans (Blackman et al., 2005; Chaney, 2009; Malone-Colon, 2007). Many marriage

education programs either do not target the unique needs and cultural strengths of black families or have such a small sample size of African Americans that they cannot generalize to the population. The development of healthy relationship and marriage interventions designed for African Americans has been increasingly noted as important. The African American Healthy Marriage Initiative (www.aahmi.org) has provided institutional support and national visibility to the challenges, strengths, and promise of African American marriage. The focus on the unique needs, cultural strongholds, and opportunities to better educate and support African American couples—both married and unmarried—has become stronger and stronger. This renewed interest has created an opportunity to highlight how African American couples can address unique challenges while simultaneously sharing strategies that have worked through generations to support healthy African American marriages. The persistent desire to be married and the informal network within the African American community to support marriage are important parts of the promise of black marriage. In addition, the untold stories and strategies of African Americans that have been married for 30, 40, 50, and 80 or more years have not been fully told in the research (Marks et al., 2008). These strongholds are important elements that point to the promise of African American marriage.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

By Grace: The Challenges, Strengths and Promise of African American Marriages expands on understandings of the challenges confronting African American marriage and relationship building, the strengths and resilience of African American marriage, and strategies of how to sustain African American relationships. Many books about black marriage either highlight deficits or do not offer an examination of contemporary issues affecting black marriages. More needs to be done to capture what works and harness that information to strengthen black relationships. Instead, much of the literature is written on what is wrong, often not noting the strengths and resilience of this population. This book fills these gaps in the literature by examining not only current issues that affect African American marriages and relationships but also the strengths and possibilities for the future of African American marriages, using an intergenerational approach. Social workers have an important role to play. The book highlights the significant role of social workers and how social workers can strengthen African American marriages and relationships.

Chapter 2, “African American Marriage and Economics,” highlights how economic challenges are experienced in African American marriages. Tricia Bent-Goodley and Berenecia Johnson-Eanes focus on how economic issues affect African American marriages, some of the unique historical connections between financial strain and relationship challenges among African Americans, and how strengths have been used to respond to this challenge. The chapter also includes a focus on how class differences and wealth status within families and across generations affect the functioning and viability of African American marriages.

The chapter ends with a discussion of how social workers can respond to economic issues that affect African American marriages.

Chapter 3, "Social Policy and Black Marriage," explores how African Americans perceive federal marriage promotion efforts. Through a qualitative study of 24 African American men and women, Cassandra Chaney presents results that help us better understand how African Americans view public policies that promote marriage. The chapter also examines the strengths and limitations of government intervention within African American marriages from a historical and contemporary perspective. The critical role of social workers as advocates and policy practitioners is also discussed as it relates to social policy.

Chapter 4, "Race, Marital Status, and Mental Illness," focuses on how issues of mental health and mental illness affect African American marriages. King Davis and Hyejin Jung highlight how access to quality mental health care and misdiagnosis can affect African American marriages, families, and communities. Conducting an analysis of psychiatric diagnoses and admissions to state psychiatric hospitals among African Americans admitted to the Virginia state mental health system, the authors illustrate how African American marriages are affected by mental health. The authors highlight informal strengths and networks being used to address mental health, along with recommendations for how to respond to the issues. The role of social workers to strengthen mental health in support of African American couples is also discussed.

Chapter 5, "How Health Affects African American Marriages," examines the literature related to health and black marriage and presents readers with a discussion of how health affects black marriage, and how marriage affects the health of African American men and women differently. Michele Rountree and Rebecca Larsen discuss ways in which health disparities affect African American married couples and what can be done to address disparities in health to sustain healthy marriages. The chapter ends with an examination of how social workers can respond to health-related issues, including health disparities, within the context of working with African American married couples.

Chapter 6, "African American Marriage and Caregiving through the Life Span," examines how caregiving affects African American marriage and changes over the life span. Iris Carlton-LaNey and Blenda Crayton explore how the caregiving of children, parents, and relatives can disproportionately affect African American marriages. The chapter includes a focus on how caring for each other during the older adult phase of life affects marriage. The chapter ends by examining essential elements of what is needed as one serves in the role of caregiver across the marital life span and how social workers can support caregiving at different points in the life span.

Chapter 7, "African American Women and Marriage," focuses on the experiences and challenges facing black women as they relate to marriage. Colita Nichols Fairfax and Tricia Bent-Goodley examine challenges from mate selection to the disproportionate number of African American women receiving higher education compared with male counterparts and its impact on African American marriage. Familial expectations of African American women as they relate to marriage are examined, as well as how these expectations shape

the experience of black women. The chapter also explores the challenges that African American women face within marriage and how social workers can provide a gender-based response to supporting African American women who are married or seeking to be married.

Chapter 8, “Black Masculinity, Manhood, and Marriage,” explores the meaning of African American manhood from a historical and contemporary context and how it affects and connects with African American marriage. Waldo E. Johnson, Jr. provides particular attention to messages regarding African American men and manhood and how these ideas affect perceptions of African American marriage. Notions of how African American manhood and masculinity are shaped are discussed. The ways in which manhood and marriage intersect within the African American community are also examined. Implications for how the social work profession can respond are also discussed in this chapter.

Chapter 9, “Marriage Diversity in the African American Community,” articulates the importance of recognizing that there is diversity of marriage in the African American community, with a focus on interracial and same-sex marriages. Noelle M. St. Vil, Christopher St. Vil, and Waldo E. Johnson, Jr. examine ways in which interracial, cross-cultural, and same-sex marriages are experienced both within and outside of the community, along with the strategies needed to strengthen and support these marriages. The role of social workers in understanding how diversity and social justice issues come together to uniquely affect diverse populations is discussed.

Chapter 10, “African American Marriage Interventions: Strengthening the Social Work Response,” summarizes the major points presented in the book, provides a review of current healthy marriage and healthy relationship education programs for African American couples, and provides a description of core approaches that build on the cultural strengths and resilience of African Americans. Tricia Bent-Goodley identifies promising practices and approaches in the field and the unique role that social workers play in addressing these issues across social work settings. The role of social workers with regard to intervention design and development, participation in social work research in this area, and the need to expand the role of social workers in healthy relationship education are also discussed.

By Grace challenges readers to expand their understanding about the intersection and complexity of challenges confronting African American marriages and relationships. The book is designed to encourage and inspire readers to better understand how to use strengths to promote the promise of African American marriage and families. Social workers are essential voices in promoting and helping to sustain African American marriages.

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