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A Qualitative Study of Black Married Couples' Relationships With Their Extended Family Networks

Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services
2018, Vol. 99(1) 56–66
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sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1044389418756847
journals.sagepub.com/home/fis



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Abstract

Historically extended family networks have been identified as contributing to the resiliency of Black families. However, little is known about how extended family networks impact the lives of Black married couples. What we do know largely stems from quantitative research. Using a thematic analysis of qualitative interviews, we examine extended family network relationships among 47 Black couples from the Contemporary Black Marriage Study who had been married for more than 5 years. Black married couples' relationship with extended family networks affects the marriage through the following acts: (a) extended family living, (b) childcare, (c) advice and emotional support, and (d) interfamilial conflict. The four themes influenced Black marriages in various ways. This study has implications for social workers working with married couples.

Keywords

marriage, extended family networks, black male-female relationships

Manuscript received: January 19, 2017; Revised: June 6, 2017; Accepted: June 17, 2017

Disposition editor: Sondra J. Fogel

The benefits of marriage have been widely documented. Researchers have suggested that healthy marriage improves mental and physical health for men, women, and children and is the key to healthy families and communities (Blackman, Clayton, Glenn, Malone-Colon, & Roberts, 2005; Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000; King & Allen, 2009; Raley, Sweeny, & Wondra, 2015; Williams, Sassler, & Nicholson, 2008). Yet marriage rates are declining across all populations in the United States (Raley et al., 2015; Wilcox, Marquardt, Popnoe, & Whitehead, 2009), with Blacks being less likely to experience marriage compared to other racial groups (Administration of Children and Families [ACF], 2006; Bryant, Taylor, Lincoln, Chatters, & Jackson, 2008; Raley et al., 2015). Blacks have lower rates of marriage and marital stability, higher rates of divorce, and higher

rates of single-headed parent households than other racial groups (National Healthy Marriage Resources Center, 2016; Ooms, 2002; Raley et al., 2015). While Black marriage statistics are partially a result of structural oppression (Dixon, 2009; Raley et al., 2015), the relationships married couples maintain with their extended families may also influence marital

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outcomes (St. Vil, 2015). By examining how the relationships with extended family networks impact Black marriages, we may be able to develop interventions that strengthen them. This study examines the role of extended family networks in the lives of Black married couples.

In this study, *extended family networks* refers to the exchange of resources and emotional support between couples' and their families of origin. Historically, extended family networks were identified as a strength of Black families (Hill, 2003; McAdoo, 2007). For example, extended family networks promote resiliency among Black single-headed households through the provision of childrearing (Gonzalez, Jones, & Parent, 2014; Jones, Zalot, Foster, Sterrett, & Chester, 2007; Richardson, 2010). It is possible that extended family networks provide similar supports to Black married couples. However, less is known about how the relationships Black married couples maintain with their extended family networks influence their marriages.

Extended Family Networks and Marriage

Extended family networks are complex; they offer various types of support and can have both positive and negative effects on marriage. Types of support can include financial, emotional, and practical support. Financial support is characterized by monetary giving and is based on economic need and obligation (Martin & Martin, 1978). Emotional support is characterized as offering advice, sensitivity, or understanding (Martin & Martin, 1978). Practical support may include help with housework, transportation, and childcare (Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2004; Stack, 1975).

Each type of support may result in positive and/or negative outcomes. On one hand, extended family networks can provide psychological, social, and economic support (Boyd-Franklin, 2003), all of which are associated with increased self-esteem and marital satisfaction (Brown, Orbuch, & Maharaj, 2010). For example, relationship-specific support received from family is associated with marital success for both husbands and wives

(Bryant & Conger, 1999). In other words, when individuals perceive approval of their relationship from their extended family networks, they are more likely to experience satisfaction, stability, and commitment to their marriage. On the other hand, negative interactions (characterized by making too many demands, taking advantage of, or criticizing one spouse or the couple; Taylor, Brown, Chatters, & Lincoln, 2012) with members of extended family networks are associated with increased marital stressors (Brown et al., 2010), lower relationship satisfaction (Taylor et al., 2012), and lower marital success (Bryant, Conger, & Meehan, 2001). While previous research identifies variables that are associated with marital satisfaction and marital success, quantitative research is unable to provide a detailed understanding in how these relationships affect marriages. A qualitative exploration may offer more insight.

Historically, family is considered the primary social network of married couples, characterized by more frequent interaction, more frequent exchanges of support, and deeper emotional ties compared to other type of networks such as friends (McAdoo, 1978; Martin & Martin, 1978; Stack, 1975). Widmer, Kellerhals, and Levy (2004) found that the majority of couples (four out of every five) were more family- than friendship-oriented, meaning they regularly interacted with and felt more closely connected to family members opposed to friends. Because family members often have a more consistent and stable presence in the lives of couples, the relationships couples maintain with their extended family networks may be more stable but also more complex than those with friends or other type of network members (Fingerman, Hay, & Birditt, 2004). In other words, the intricate nature of family relationships may evoke both positive and negative feelings (Klein & Milardo, 2000). Additionally, the type of relationships couples maintain with their extended family should be considered. For example, Fiori, Rauer, Birditt, Brown, Jager, and Orbuch (2016) found that couples who have high levels of interaction with the wife's family and low levels of interaction with the husband's family report higher levels of

negative marital quality. Due to the complexity of relationships among married couples and their extended family networks, this present study was designed to better understand how the extended family networks of Black couples impact on their marriages.

Method

Data from the Contemporary Black Marriage Study (CBMS) was utilized for this study. The CBMS was launched in 2007 to explore cross-racial marital experience through semistructured interviews on attitudes toward marital roles and the experience of contemporary married life among Black couples. In the present study, we explore the role of extended family networks in the day-to-day lives of Black married couples. This is an Institutional Review Board (IRB)-approved study.

Sample

Using purposive sampling methods, participants were recruited from the Beginning School Study (BSS), Craigslist, and through the distribution of fliers at local organizations and community events. The BSS was conducted from 1985 to 2005 and followed 800 randomly sampled lower to middle-income Black and White urban children beginning in first grade in public school. Inclusion criteria required that (a) both spouses self-identified as Black, (b) the marriage had endured between 5 and 15 years, and (c) at least one spouse within the dyad was between 30 and 40 years of age. The final sample included 47 couples residing in the same eastern metropolitan area.

The mean length of marriage for all couples was 7.12 years. Of these couples, 20 were African American, 13 participants had a least one spouse who was a Black African immigrant, and 14 participants had at least one spouse who was an Afro-Caribbean immigrant. Overall, participants ranged in age from 24 to 45 years, with a mean of 34.5 years. All but two couples had children living at home; most were the biological children of both spouses, but the timing of birth ranged from

well before the couple was married to several years after. Level of education ranged from not completing ninth grade to earning a master's degree; however, only a few participants reported pursuing education beyond high school. Household income among our participants ranged from below the poverty line to over \$150,000 a year; however, the majority of participants were working- to middle-class. Class definitions in this study were constructed using the following indicators: home ownership and neighborhood quality, employment status, income levels and stability, and education (Kohn, 1969; Lareau, 2011; Oliver & Shapiro, 2006; Weber, 2003). Middle-class couples included those in which both spouses are college-educated or work in white-collar jobs, have sufficient income to meet their needs, and own their own homes. Working-class couples included those in which spouses had a high school degree, worked in blue- or pink-collar job that were at times tenuous, and might own their homes but these homes are smaller than middle-class couples' and are in less desirable neighborhoods.

Procedures

The CBMS utilized a survey, semistructured couple and individual interviews, and direct observations of couples. Two researchers conducted interviews and observations. Both researchers developed the interview guide and protocol. In order to ensure consistency, they meet regularly to discuss their experiences. The ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale (EMS; Fowers & Olson, 1993), which is a 15-item scale with strong support of reliability and validity, was used to assess marital satisfaction and marital distortion. Basic demographic information was also gathered. Immediately after participants completed the ENRICH inventory, they jointly participated in a semistructured interview that lasted 60-90 minutes and covered relationship history, relationship change over time, idealized notions of how a marriage both should work and actually works on a day-to-day basis, perceptions of the couple's relationship compared to other married couples they know, beliefs about how

women in the workplace impact marriage, and beliefs about how spousal relationships are affected by Black men having a difficult time in the job market, in school, and the legal system. It is important to note that while not an initial focus of this study, couples' relationships with their extended family networks emerged as couples responded to many of the interview topics listed above. Separate interviews with each spouse were also conducted (either on the same day or at a later date), covering the same issues as those addressed in the couples' interview but allowing spouses to clarify and expand upon their personal perspectives. These individual interviews generally lasted 30-60 minutes with each spouse.

When feasible, couples were observed in a family activity such as eating a meal or playing with their children for the purpose of better understanding the couples' interactions. In other cases, field notes were made regarding informal interactions observed between spouses and their children while the interviewers were present. Multiple methods of data collection, triangulation, was used in an effort increase the validity of research findings (Maxwell, 2013). Additional steps taken to increase validity include intensive long-term involvement, the collection of rich data, as well as searching for discrepant evidence and negative cases. Interviews were fully transcribed and were compiled into profiles that included transcriptions of substantive quotes and other relevant information from the interviewers' field notes.

Analysis

We conducted secondary thematic analysis of the profiles created from the CBMS, which consisted of identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns that were present across marital narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We utilized the steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), which include (1) deep familiarization with the data and original codes, (2) searching for themes, (3) reviewing themes, (4) defining and naming themes, and (5) producing the report. We examined the profiles that we created to familiarize ourselves with

the data. We also reviewed each transcript to identify more specific content pertaining to extended family networks; all text referring to extended family networks were coded.

After coding all sections of the text referring to extended family networks, we read through all the codes to get a sense of preliminary themes. A table was created identifying potential themes and definitions of each theme. We then searched for preliminary themes pertaining to (a) how couples described their relationships with their extended family networks. In keeping with the goal of this study, we noted how these relationships affected the marriage. Next, we reviewed and refined themes. Specifically, we analyzed themes to determine ways we could further combine, separate, or omit themes. Next, we defined and named themes, and identified and redefined sub-themes, to determine how each theme reflected the data. Finally, quotes were selected that exemplified key themes.

Results

Relationships With Extended Family Networks

Overall, the themes that emerged among married Black couples with regard to relationships with their extended family networks that influence marriage were extended family living, childcare, exchange of advice or emotional support, and interfamilial conflict.

Extended family living. Many couples cohabited with extended family at some point in their marriage and had mixed feelings about their experiences. Many couples needed to cohabitate with family members while they worked on getting a place of their own. Overall, couples generally reported a great deal of joy associated with being around their extended family members, but they also tended to state that having a place of their own was best for the health of their marriages. Couples were more concerned about their autonomy and privacy, which was jeopardized when residing with extended family members. For example, one couple reported living with

the wife's mother in Cuba in the past because "it's hard to get independent housing" there. They were thankful for having a place to stay, but both spoke of "difficulties" associated with that living situation and described it as not ideal. The couple had since moved to the United States and had a place of their own but admit that they love when the wife's mother visits from Cuba.

Some couples eventually got a place of their own but had to house extended family members who needed them (such as older family members, siblings, or cousins). For example, one couple had lived with the wife's mother until they could afford a place of their own. Although the couple eventually moved into their own place, they ended up moving back into the mother's house at one point because "she was calling all the time" and they were concerned about her "being by herself." The couple was eventually able to find a solution where they were able to provide care to the wife's mother while also maintaining their privacy. At the time of the interview, the couple had their own residence, but the mother was living in their basement. The wife expressed gratitude toward her husband for his devotion to her mother and said, "He married my mother when he married me."

Child care. Most couples reported that their extended families had helped with childcare. This was extremely beneficial for couples who were teen parents. Without the help of extended family during these times, many couples felt they would be unable to finish their education or maintain jobs. Ultimately, it was the assistance from extended family that helped young couples get to a place where they were able to support their families. Additionally, childcare from extended family networks increased couples' ability to fulfill multiple roles and ultimately decreased stressors among couples. For example, one couple discussed how both of their mothers helped raise their kids because the wife was only 14 years old and the husband was 19 years old when their first child was born. They described their families as being "really supportive"; otherwise, she would have had

to have an abortion. As young couples, these spouses often realize that if they hadn't had family support, they likely would not have been able to raise their children properly and manage their schooling. Parents of young couples often provided support specifically because of the schooling issue: They did not want their grandchildren or their own children to drop out of school. The wife mentioned that she had her first child at the end of her 9th grade year in high school. She states:

His mother (husband's) was so supportive, she didn't, well his mother is disabled, but she always, you know, took care of her grandchildren and I never had to have daycare. She was always watching them for me. Between her and my mother, cause my mother at that time worked at night, so I finished high school.

While many couples reported receiving help with childcare, many couples also described providing childcare for extended family members or housing children from their extended family members when necessary. For example, one wife, when asked about the time she spends with her extended family network, replied, "Most of the time I babysit." When asked, "So you spend more time with your niece's baby than with your niece?" she replied, "Yes, because I babysit her." Her niece drops the baby off every morning. Similarly, another couple housed the wife's sister and sister's baby when the wife's mother passed. The husband described that when the wife's sister and sister's baby moved in, he had to teach his wife how to be a parent "because she never really has been." The couples who took in children of extended family described these times as highly enjoyable and ended up feeling closer together as a family as a result. They also, however, simultaneously described feeling quite stressed at taking care of another's child, which could often place a great deal of burden on the marriage.

The exchange of advice and emotional support. Many couples reported that they often sought advice from extended family members. Couples felt it was important for their

marriages to rely on their spouses for advice and emotional support but that at times it was also important to seek such support from within their extended family networks. For example, one husband mentioned that he doesn't mind not always being his wife's confidant. He says:

We have to talk about a lot, no particular reason, marriage is just hard. It doesn't mean nothing like, there still may be some person she doesn't want to talk to me about, like she would rather talk to her cousin or aunt. But no worries because we don't think about it, we don't worry about it. I trust her so I don't have to worry about none of that.

Another husband, who is bothered by his wife's unusually close relationship with her mother and who experiences negative interactions with his parents regarding his marriage, sought out advice from his wife's uncle during his wife's period of depression. He talked to her uncle about wanting to "walk away from the marriage" and her uncle replied that the husband surely did not want to spend his life "growing old by himself."

While seeking advice and emotional support can sometimes be highly supportive of the marriage, an overdependence on family for support can threaten marriage. For example, the same husband who turned to his wife's uncle for advice and emotional support expressed jealousy over his wife's relationship with her mother. He doesn't like the fact that her mother "calls all the time." He describes a conversation he had with his pastor:

One thing I brought up was her relationship with her mother and the pastor was just like, ain't no one trying to take your place. He understood. And I'm not sayin' I don't understand but sometimes I'm like man come on, cuz I think that was a big part of our earlier fights too. I felt like I wasn't number one. I'm like as much as you love her, I'm your husband and you should put me first, I feel like I'm not her first ... one of my friends was a mama's boy and that didn't last ... I defer to what she needs first. A lot of times I didn't feel that. And if her mom needed her she was gonna leave me, not high and dry but you know.

Interfamilial conflict. Some couples expressed a great deal of marital tension was driven by the fact that one or both spouses are disfavored by members of their spouse's family. For example, one couple mentioned that both of their parents live in the area. The wife said, "[t]hat the hardest thing about being married is the interference from extended family." The husband agrees and said his mother "cannot stand my wife." His mother thought that he should have married his biological daughter's mother. The husband describes how his parents "got bougie" [began to have an elevated view of themselves] and "moved to the deluxe apartment in the sky" and thus now dictates that he should live similarly. He reported that he feels out of place with his family now, especially his mother. He tries to keep his mother "at arm's length" because she is very critical of the way "his wife dresses, her demeanor, and her attitude." He talks about how his mother only approved of his past girlfriends who she deemed "wholesome little school-teacher types." The couple feels that despite the stress that comes with this disfavoring of the wife, the couple's marital bond has been strengthened by their struggle.

Discussion

Couples in our study spoke of the importance of extended family networks and the benefits and challenges accompanied with family ties. Relationships with extended family networks characterized by extended family living, childcare, seeking advice or emotional support, and interfamilial conflict sometimes strengthened marriages; other times added stress to marriages; and sometimes simultaneously strengthened and stressed the marriage. This is similar to previous findings by Finger-man et al. (2004) in which participants viewed family with ambivalence, meaning participants had mixed feelings pertaining to family, both feelings of closeness and feeling that these relationships were problematic. These findings are also similar to other quantitative studies that demonstrate the capacity for extended family networks to impact married couples both positively and negatively (St. Vil, 2015; Taylor et al., 2012; Taylor,

Chatters, Woodward, & Brown, 2013). However, unlike previous studies that were quantitative in nature, our study provides more detailed insight into how extended family networks influence the marriage of couples.

Many of the couples in our study described extended family living at least one point during their marriages in order to meet some of their own needs (mostly financial) or the needs of a loved one (caregiving responsibilities, financial). This finding is similar to previous scholarship that documents extended family living among African Americans (Ruggles, 1994). Unlike previous literature, our study illustrates the effect of extended family living on marriages. On one hand, couples enjoyed the daily interaction with family members and appreciated having a place to stay. On the other hand, couples felt that they lost autonomy and privacy, which negatively affected their marriages.

Many couples described their extended family network members as providing childcare. Couples describe extended family members providing childcare services as a means to help them financially or to help them further their education and/or career goals. Many studies have been done on single mothers and extended family support (Gonzalez et al., 2014; Jones et al., 2007; Richardson, 2010), but little attention has been paid to married couples. This may be due to previous research, which reported that single mothers receive more help from extended family than married mothers. It may also stem from research that emphasizes the benefits of marriage on child health outcomes, suggesting that a healthy marriage between biological parents is all that is needed. However, the results from our study demonstrate that although our participants are married, extended family is still an important resource for couples raising children. Two-parent families are often viewed as the ideal setting to raise children because marriage results in numerous benefits for men, women, and children (Blackman et al., 2005; Raley et al., 2015). However, our findings demonstrate that a two-parent family may not be enough to ensure healthy family dynamics. For example, extended family can reinforce

social skills and values among children. Additionally, extended family relationships can strengthen marriages by protecting against the inability to fulfill multiple roles. In addition to receiving help with childcare, some couples were also raising children from their extended family networks (nieces, nephews, and cousins). This is similar to literature describing the benefits and challenges of kinship care (O'Brien, 2012). Specifically, in the Black community, there has been a focus on the challenges of grandmothers providing kinship care (Pittman, 2015; Simpson & Lawrence-Webb, 2009). Our study illuminates the significance of kinship care on the marriage of Black couples.

Couples describe how seeking advice/emotional support from extended family members impact their marriages. Couples describe instances where they rely on family for decisions pertaining to children, marriage, and other major life decisions. In these instances, similar to previous research, advice and emotional support can have positive effects on a marriage by increasing married individual's self-esteem and sense of self-worth (Brown et al., 2010) and increase marital satisfaction by validating the marriage (Bryant & Conger, 1999). For example, Taylor et al. (2012) found that emotional support from extended family was positively associated with relationship satisfaction for married and cohabitating native Blacks and Caribbean immigrants. However, unlike previous findings (Taylor et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2013), our study illustrates that seeking advice/emotional support from extended family, even if it is positive advice/support, can also have negative effects on marriages—particularly, if one spouse is overly dependent on this type of support and relies on it more than advice/emotional support from one's spouse.

In our study, some couples experienced interfamilial conflict often stemming from the dislike of the spouse by the extended family network. This may be similar to what Taylor et al. (2012, 2013) describe as negative interaction. Taylor et al. (2012, 2013) findings suggest that negative interactions with one's

extended family network decreases marital satisfaction. Our findings partially support their findings. In our study, while couples reported increased stress on their marriages from interfamilial conflict, they also reported a strengthening effect. Couples reported that interfamilial conflict made their bonds as husband and wife stronger because they had to pull together to support and defend each other.

Study Limitations and Future Research

This study has limitations. First, this study included Black couples from an eastern city in the United States; thus, the findings from this study cannot be generalized beyond the participants in this study or to other geographic locations or racial groups. Second, this study is based on self-reports and may suffer from bias of participants or inaccuracy in remembering historical events. Third, the first author was not involved in data collection. However, the primary investigators were included in the analysis, interpretation, and discussion of the findings. Additionally, they are coauthors on this manuscript. Despite these limitations, the findings of this study provide meaningful contributions to the literature on understanding how the extended family networks of Black married couples impact Black marriages.

Two areas for future research can be derived from the results of this study. First, it is possible that spouses with children receiving support from extended family may fare better than spouses with children receiving no support from extended family. Further research on extended family support among married couples is warranted. Second, participants in our study, while of African descent and living in the United States, had origins in the United States, the Caribbean, and Africa. Future studies should include an analysis by Black ethnic groups to determine if differences exist.

Implications for Practice

Extended family relationships affect couples in various ways, which can include one or

more of the ways identified in this study. This study has implications for social workers working with Black couples. First, social workers must be aware of the influence of extended family networks on marriages and committed to helping couples strengthen these relationships in order to maximize the benefits of marriage. For couples in extended family living situations, social workers can help couples assess the effect on their marriages. Additionally, they can help couples determine strategies that allow them to maintain their privacy and autonomy in the midst of extended family living. For example, social workers can help couples identify where and when couples can discuss private matters such as when nobody else is home, quietly in the couple's bedroom, and places outside of the home. Social workers can also encourage couples to carve out time to maintain separate and distinct marital identities from their extended family networks by making time for date nights and other outings as couples.

Social workers can encourage couples to utilize their extended family network as a resource for childcare when needed. They can help couples identify those in their family networks who are willing and able to help. Additionally, marriage practitioners can help couples who are raising children from members of their extended family networks decrease related stressors by helping them identify resources for kinship caregivers. Additionally, social workers can advocate for policies that promote more resources and support for kinship caregivers.

Emotional support and advice from family members can negatively and positively influence marriage. Social workers can help couples assess the advice/emotional support received from extended family networks and determine its effect on their marriages. Additionally, in cases where one or both spouses are overly dependent on advice from extended family networks to the point where it negatively affects their spouses, social workers can help couples communicate their feelings effectively. Social workers can also support couples in learning how to rely on each other for advice/emotional support.

Lastly, when experiencing interfamilial conflict, social workers can help couples assess the conflict and its meaning on the marriage. Social workers can make couples aware of the impact of their extended family networks on their marriages by discussing couples' relationships with extended family members and determining how both spouses feel about these relationships. Community social worker can help couples develop strategies to reduce conflict with extended family network members. This may require helping couples frame discussions with extended family network members, encouraging couples to be supportive of one another even when the extended family network is not, and determining how to maintain privacy and autonomy in the midst of extended family living. Through assessments of couples' relationships with their extended family networks, social workers can promote these relationships as a viable resource for Black married couples.

Conclusion

In conclusion, extended family networks of Black married couples are complex and have varying impacts on marriages. Extended family networks can add stress to a marriage but also help couples balance multiple role expectations, meet the demands of day-to-day life, instill morals and values, and provide emotional and social support. Therefore, it is necessary that social workers assist couples in learning how to reap the benefits of their extended family network and minimize stressors. It is these strategies that will ensure that Black extended family networks continue to add the resiliency of all extended family network members, including Black married couples.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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