

EMPLOYMENT FACTORS IN CONFLICT IN AFRICAN AMERICAN HETEROSEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS

Some Perceptions of Women

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Conflict between African American men and women has led to crisis in their relationships (Hare & Hare, 1989). A major source of this conflict is economic marginalization of African American men, particularly in the labor force (Madhubuti, 1989; Scott & Stewart, 1989). Although it is problems stemming from this that leads to negative interactions between men and women, of far more consequence is how these problems are perceived by women. Many African American women, although aware, are not keenly so of the pernicious ways in which restrictive opportunities in economic life in American society impinge on men and, therefore, attribute the difficulties they experience to flaws in their personal values and character. Some have internalized the stereotype of the unmotivated and irresponsible Black man and believe that they are not possessed with the work ethic. And, it is perceptions such as this, which further exacerbates the conflict that they already experience.

Bringing perceptions as it relates to this to the fore is important to begin to alleviate this as an added dimension in conflict between African American men and women. However, there are no studies that have done this. This article first reviews employment factors affecting both sexes. It is argued that although both undergo economic marginalization, particularly in the labor force, the impact may be more psychologically damaging for men—especially because masculinity and manhood are tied to economic and occupational suc-

cess. It is also argued that what may be more damaging to men and subsequently their relationships are expectations women have of them, and how they perceive and deal with them when they do not meet these expectations. Then, using findings from a survey on African American heterosexual relationships, it describes the perceptions of some women. Finally, it suggests that understanding of and sensitivity to this issue by both African American men and women may help to alleviate this as a source of conflict in relationships.

EMPLOYMENT FACTORS

The National Research Council (1989) reports that African Americans made substantial gains in the 1960s, when the economy was expanding and civil rights and antipoverty programs were initiated. Their relative economic position, however, improved only slowly during the 1970s and deteriorated in the early 1980s during the recession years. Since the 1980s, the economic status of African Americans improved, in which unemployment decreased from 14.5% and 14% in 1980 to 11.8% and 10.8% in 1990 for males and females, respectively (Census Bureau, 1996a). Notwithstanding this, the unemployment rate for both African American males and females has consistently been and still remains to be double that of their White counterparts.

In May, 1997, the unemployment rate for African American males (civilian noninstitutional population older than 20 years of age) was 8.2% compared to 3% for White males. For African American females, it was 8.8% compared to 3.5% for White females in the same age group (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1997). These figures may be grossly underestimated, considering that the labor force only counts those who are employed and unemployed with unemployment referring to those who looked for work in the month that the survey was taken. Though the labor force participation rate was higher for African American males, 71.5% (females, 64.1%), there were more females than males in the population count and, therefore, more in the labor market (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1997). Considering these rates, close to 30% of the civilian nonin-

stitutional population of males did not participate in the labor market. Though this figure may include those in college, retired, or otherwise, it may also include a large number who have become discouraged and given up the search for work. Overall, there were approximately 90 males to 100 females 20 years of age or older in the labor market. In addition, those counted as employed may not be gainfully employed, as African Americans are disproportionately stuck involuntarily in part-time jobs and experience sporadic unemployment due to short-term work.

Although historical and current discrimination are the most conspicuous factors contributing to disproportionately higher levels of unemployment among African Americans, there are other factors that also contribute. These factors include those associated with "structural economic changes such as the shift from goods-producing to service-producing industries, the increasing polarization of the labor market into low-wage and high-wage sectors, technological innovations, and relocation of manufacturing industries out of the central cities" (Wilson, 1987, p. 39). Industrialization led African Americans to migrate from rural to urban centers throughout the century and has been largely responsible for economic gains over the years. However, super-industrialization is leading to structural changes that are diminishing these gains, especially for those concentrated in high-poverty areas. The shift of urban centers from "centers of distribution of material goods to centers of administration, information exchange and higher order service provision," is leading to decreased employment opportunities for African Americans, especially those who have not obtained the education and skills necessary to fill the new job requirements (Wilson, 1987, p. 39). Also, the large number of jobs shifting from the inner city to suburban areas is leading to displacement of African Americans in sectors in which they have been typically employed. For example, Wilson (1987) reports that

Between 1947 and 1972 the central cities of the thirty-three most populous metropolitan areas lost 880,000 manufacturing jobs, while manufacturing employment in their suburbs grew by 2.5 million. The same cities lost 857,00 jobs in retail and wholesale trade at the same time that their suburbs gained millions of such positions. Also,

between 1950 and 1980, populations in these central cities lost more than 9 million whites and added more than 5 million blacks. (pp. 100-101)

This is critical considering that, in 1995, a majority of African Americans (54%) lived in urban centers, while only 32% lived outside central cities and 14% lived in other areas (Census Bureau, 1996b).

There also still remains gross disparities in income levels between Black and White Americans. For 1995, the median income for African American males was \$24,798 compared to \$33,515 for White males (Census Bureau, 1996b). African American females have made the greatest gains in income levels over the years, coming closer to the level of White females. However, they still earned less than the four sex groups. Their median income was \$21,079 compared to \$24,264 for White females (Census Bureau, 1996b). Though their income level is closer to that of White females, African American females are more likely to work more hours and do not earn as much as their counterparts per hour or week (Burbridge, 1994; National Research Council, 1989).

Differential levels in education may contribute to disparities in employment and income levels between African and White Americans. For example, in March 1995, 15.2% of African American males in the age group 35 through 44 had completed a bachelor's degree compared to 31.2% of White males (Census Bureau, 1996c). White females had completed 4 or more years of college, 28.1%, compared to Black females, 16.1% (Census Bureau, 1996c). Although African American males who have lower levels of education are more unemployed and earn less than their White counterparts, those males who have graduated from college earn substantially more; although there is still a wide gap between them and White males. In 1994, African American male college graduates earned an estimated median income of \$32,760, compared to White males whose estimated median earnings were \$42,692 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1995).

This educational differential may also have implications for the probability of professional women to find mates at their income and status levels. In 1990, the number of females who had attained professional degrees was almost double that of males in most categories. African American males "were less likely to receive degrees of any type" with the number of doctorate degrees conferred to African American females double that of those conferred to males (Tidwell, Kuumba, Jones, & Watson, 1993, p. 250).

The type of occupation in which African Americans are employed may also be a factor in disparities in income levels. African Americans are still greatly overrepresented in low-skill jobs. In 1994, African American males were more likely to be employed as laborers or machine operators, 30.9%, whereas White males were more likely to be employed in managerial and professional occupations, 27.5% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1995). African American females, 25.7%, were more likely than White females, 16.6%, to work in service occupations (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1995). African American females were also more likely to be employed in "typically Black female occupations"—those in which their representation is twice that in the labor force. These occupations include chambermaids, welfare service aids, cleaners, and nurse's aids (National Research Council, 1989, p. 314).

Despite differentials in employment and income levels between African and White Americans, especially for males, African American females still use standards of the dominant culture when seeking out mates. At a minimum, women expect potential mates to be gainfully employed. However, it is problems in the labor force that make it difficult for some men to fulfill these expectations, subsequently leading to difficulties in their relationships with women.

Though difficulties in the labor market affect both African American males and females, employment for males in American society is inextricably interwoven with manhood. A marked way in which it affects the sexes differently is the way in which social roles have been defined. Historically, the "cult of domesticity"

defined a woman's role as in the home. Although the 1960s' women's liberation movement has made it possible for women to seek fulfillment outside of the home, fulfilling one's role in the home is still acceptable by American standards. Thus, whether a woman is employed, she may still be able to carry out gender roles. It is quite the contrary for men. Cazenave (1981) notes that "being a man in American society still means achieving, accomplishing, having a good job, and providing adequately for oneself and one's family" (p. 177). Henceforth,

While *objectively* the economic position of black women is worse than that of white men, white women, and black men, *subjectively* it is black men who are forced into the humiliating "double bind" of proving their manhood while being denied access to the legitimate tools with which to do so. (pp. 177-178)

In light of this, being unemployed or employed in jobs that are demeaning and offer no sense of achieving and/or jobs that do not provide enough to meet the basic living requirements may be extremely difficult with which to contend and more psychologically damaging for males. Unaware of how racism and structural factors intertwine to create obstacles in the job market, some may attribute their problems to their own personal failure and avoid, at all costs, encounters with the job market. Others, on the contrary, may view their difficulty as a personal assault on their manhood and reject marginal opportunities altogether, whereas still others may try but may encounter constant obstacles. Whatever the case may be, exclusion and marginality in the job market may lead some to become discouraged. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports (1995) that African Americans comprise a disproportionate number of discouraged workers. This may subsequently lead some to internalize a negative attitude toward participating in the labor force. Unfortunately, it is this attitudinal disposition that leads males to have difficulty in their relationships with females.

PERCEPTIONS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

A questionnaire with several demographic and four open ended questions was distributed through various African American newspapers and associations and on college campuses during a 4- to 5-year period. The respondents included 507 males and females from all over the United States, primarily from the Northeast and Southeast, of which 313 or 62% were female. For female respondents, their ages ranged from 18 to 81, with the mean age being 30 years. Approximately 18% were married, 15% were divorced, and 61% were single. Nearly 32% had received college degrees, and 68% had no college degree. Of the 68%, approximately 49% were students, which may mean that they were seeking college degrees.

One of the open-ended questions asked the respondents to report their general feelings of the opposite sex based on their experiences in relationships. Although there were a wide range of responses, an emergent theme was the perceptions of some female respondents regarding the attitudes of African American males toward work. One perception that some seemed to share is that African American males do not possess a value for hard work. Here, it is thought that African Americans, particularly males, need to work hard, because this is what may be necessary to overcome obstacles stemming from racism. Also, although the sexual revolution has essentially dismantled rigid gender roles prescribed to men and women, some women still hold the traditional value of the man as the head of the household. This appears to be particularly the case for those who were reared in households in which their fathers were the heads. Some seem conflicted because they are unable to meet potential mates who meet up to this standard, especially those who are highly paid professionals, for example, medical doctors.

Although expecting males to head households (be the primary breadwinner) is consistent with the ideal patriarchal familial structure in American society, such has not always been and still is not the case for many African American families. Beginning with experiences in enslavement, food and clothing rations were made

to the family through the woman. This means that African American women held a certain degree of power with regard to the family resources (although superficially so, because White males wielded external control over them). Because institutional deprivation still makes it difficult for males to function in the capacity of major bread-winner, households in which the woman is the primary breadwinner are still quite prevalent. Unfortunately, many African American women are unaware of historical and current socioeconomic factors prohibiting males from functioning in such a capacity and become disappointed when they fail to do so.

Another perception that African American women have of men is that they have low motivation. For example, one respondent asserts, they "lack drive. . . . While we are out working one or two jobs and/or going to school our men are at home 'chillin' after working one job." It is also believed that African American men "need to work just as hard if not harder than [African American] women because it is much harder for [them] to gain success in the White man's world." Others, such as this respondent, also resent that they "have to work hard, then . . . rush home to spend time with their man so he won't feel neglected and begin to look elsewhere for attention."

An issue, in particular, that some African American women have with men is their unwillingness to assume employment that they feel is beneath their standards. As indicated previously, there may be various reasons for this. Certain types of work may be viewed as menial, unfulfilling, and, more importantly, demeaning. Also, considering that most industries are dominated by White males, the humiliation some undergo and assaults they sustain under racist employers might not be worth the low financial return. Despite this, some women resent that they have to work while men are being choosy about the work they will do; as one respondent remarks, "I know its rough out here. I feel it too. . . . But, I still understand that the bills have to be paid and do what I have to do."

Some women also take issue with men who refuse to do work that requires manual labor. These women expressed that they do not like, in the words of one respondent "a prissy man." They have difficulty with men who do not "know how to fix anything," or who

are afraid to "get their hands dirty." An important factor to note is that before America shifted to service orientation, many jobs required men to use pure and unadulterated brute strength to get the job done. The images men are bombarded with now are those of White and, in some cases, African American men with designer suits and attaché cases moving through corporate suites with their entourage, exerting their manhood through power decisions. Thus, white-collar jobs that require less physical labor are more appealing and give the illusion of having attained some semblance of manhood, even if they require little education or skills and pay little income. Unfortunately, jobs requiring manual labor, and in which earnings may be higher, are often shunned.

Some women also think that men are too willing to find excuses or blame White men and society for their problems. It is believed that African American men "have reaped the profits of their parents and their struggles before and during the Civil Rights era, [however] do not want to earn a decent living by breaking their backs." It is also believed that they "have been handed too much," "have lost the feel for the struggle," "look for handouts from the White man," "blame the White man for being unproductive," and "are always blaming society for their misfortunes." Finally, one respondent sums up these perceptions; "Black men survived slavery but they can't survive freedom; I'm tired of hearing excuses for them."

There are also those women who express difficulty with men who are struggling to be entrepreneurs, but are unable to generate a stable and reliable income. Many African American men who attempt to go into business for themselves may be confronted with obstacles ranging from undercapitalization due to racism in lending practices to lack of personal skills and resources necessary for a successful business. Whatever the case may be, women who have had these experiences share the perceptions that when this occurs, men should, "let it go and do something practical"; they believe they should pursue entrepreneurial activities "on the side"; as one woman indicated, "instability in a man makes me nervous."

There are also those women who express frustration with men who become involved in illegal activities. It is believed that some men "don't even try" or that they "give too up easily." One

respondent expressed, "They don't want to take a stand and be counted as an educated or working man. They want fast money." She then said, "I would like for a Black man to tell me why he can pull 10 years in prison but can't pull 4 years in college." Here, it is important to note that despite the possible negative outcomes that can result from becoming involved in illicit activities in what has been described as the underground economy (Anderson, 1990; Bourgois, 1989) depending on their circumstances, some males do so because these are often the only opportunities perceived to be available. Also, given what some are able to earn in low-paying occupations, potential high earnings, advancement, and status in the underground economy can be especially luring.

Finally, some women have become so discouraged with their experiences and, because of difficulty with finding mates who are not touched in some way by economic marginalization, they are opting to "go it alone," whereas others are finding themselves alone, but not by their own choosing. One respondent expressed, "I can't spend my time with someone who doesn't have as much to bring to the relationship as I." She apparently has given up; she continues, "A man is not even a part of my life's dreams." Another respondent expressed, "I've been married twice and I turn out to be the head of the household because they had nothing to offer. Now I'm alone but not because I want to be."

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

The perceptions from women in this study could stem from the stereotype of African American men being irresponsible and unmotivated. They could also stem from personal experiences with men who either have a low value for work or have faced difficulty in the labor force and were, therefore, discouraged. Whatever the case may be, it is difficult to ascertain from the responses whether these women were able to differentiate between value orientation or disposition based on negative experiences in the labor force. African American women as a vast majority of Americans are

unaware of the complexity of the issues of race, gender, and class affecting African American life. This lack of understanding may have some bearing on the way they view men who are experiencing problems in the labor force.

As already indicated, race emerges as a salient factor in that the unemployment rate for African American males and females has consistently been more than double that of their White counterparts. There is also a wide gap in the income level of African and White American males, and African Americans are still employed disproportionately more in low skill, low-paying occupations.

With regard to gender, an assumption is often made that African American females are afflicted with race, class, and gender, whereas males are afflicted only with race and class. However, expected. As already indicated, there is a psychological dimension that is often not taken into consideration when gender is applied to males. Cazenave (1981) notes that while, "a woman [is] more likely to be assured her gender identity as a birthright . . . a male's gender identity is volatile. It has to be earned and proved on a day-to-day basis" (p. 177). For African American males, having to constantly prove their masculinity can be overwhelming when economic deprivation presents constant affronts to it.

If low value for the work ethic is indeed a factor, it is important to note that approximately one third of the African American population lives in poverty, compared to only one tenth of Whites. This means that a disproportionate number of African Americans are concentrated in the lower socioeconomic class. A way in which those in this class remain stagnant is differential socialization. Although those raised in middle- and low-income families may be socialized toward the values of the larger society, one of which is the work ethic, the level to which each is able to carry out this particular goal is the level to which each is exposed to this kind of environment.

Female-maintained households may have some implication on the socialization process in this regard, especially for males. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (1995) reports that nearly 60% of children are raised in families maintained by women. The idea that

some women "raise their daughters and love their sons"—that is, require little of their sons by way of responsibilities—may have some bearing on the level to which they internalize the work ethic. The argument is often made of the role of extended kinship in the socialization of African Americans, especially with regard to males in instances in which the father is absent. Research (Wilson, 1987) shows, however, that whereas it was common at one time for women to form subfamilies using the resources of parents and other relatives, more women are forming independent households. This may mean that relatives are not playing as significant a role as they once did. Though this may be the case, there may still be male figures in the form of mates, sexual partners, and/or friends who are present at some time or another. It is important to note, however, that there is a difference between having a male present than having one who is *actively* involved in the socialization process.

For those women who are raising them alone, boys may present special problems, especially for those living under precarious circumstances. Because patriarchy, as it exists in American society, devalues women, this may have some implication on the way mothers are perceived by their sons, especially as they approach the period of adolescence. It is during adolescence that males begin to bond with other males, usually their peers. In some instances, they may bond with older men in their communities. Because boys are able to bond with males in a way that they cannot with their mothers, the values received from their peers or these older males may come to be more valued than those received from their mothers. Thus, even though some mothers may instill certain values in their sons—one of which is the work ethic—if the males with whom they bond do not share these same values, they may be lost.

Most important is the availability of employment opportunities. As noted earlier, structural changes in the economy, such as technology and automation of industry, and polarization of the labor market into low-wage and high-wage sectors has led to a decline in high-paying industrial jobs, while there has been a rise in

service industries whose lowest levels only pay subsistence wages. Anderson (1990) makes a critical observation when noting that

Thirty years ago, a black migrant from the South could find a job in a factory and take home about \$100 a week amounting to \$5,000 a year. This is equal to approximately \$22,000 in today's dollars.¹ In those days a man of the working class could look forward to raising a family with little financial strain. Today, unskilled jobs with salaries even approaching this figure are scarce. (p. 110)

Anderson also points out that although "good jobs do exist in offices, hospitals, factories, and other large institutions these . . . jobs require training and are increasingly located in suburbs—far from . . . inner-city areas" (p. 110). More important, "When no good jobs are available the work ethic loses its force" (p. 110).

It is important to note some limitations of this work. First, the focus was on African American heterosexual relationships. It did not ask women to express their views of men as it pertains to their attitudes toward work. It asked them, as well as men, to express their views based on their experiences in relationships. However, in my own observations and experiences, I see this as a critical issue in African American heterosexual relationships. The decision was, therefore, made to make this a point of focus. Another limitation of this study is that it is not representative of the general population. More than 60% of the respondents had finished college degrees or were in college. As indicated previously, as in 1995, only 16.1% of African American females had earned college degrees. Despite these limitations, I think the expressions represented here give some indication of perceptions of African American women on this issue. This helps to understand at least one reason why relationships between African American males has reached a crisis stage. Furthermore, one can assume that the situation (difficulties males face and perceptions women have) is worse for those in lower socioeconomic brackets.

Finally, the intent of this discussion is not to minimize what was expressed by African American women. It is likely that most hold the views they do because of experiences with men who were

experiencing employment difficulties in some way or another. As indicated previously, because many are themselves struggling to survive in a society that under race, class, and, more important, gender oppression puts them at the bottom of the economic scale, trying to provide for themselves and/or their children can be overwhelming. What can be more so is finding themselves in relationships with men who are experiencing difficulties of this type. It is important, however, that both African American men and women increase their awareness of the ways in which a discriminating and changing labor market affects both sexes. Doing so may help each to be more sensitive to the other's difficulties, thereby alleviating conflicts that can result and allowing for more healthy relationships.

NOTE

1. This is referring to the year (1986) the study was conducted.

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