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Trading the Picket Fence: Perceptions of Childbirth, Marriage, and Career

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While there was a slightly lower rate of out-of-wedlock births in 2009, 41 percent of all births were to unmarried women. Although there has been an increase across the board among older age groups, Black women continue to have children out of wedlock at a disproportionately higher rate than White and Asian women. This is of particular interest, considering African-American women are increasingly attaining higher levels of education in comparison to previous generations of African-American women. As such, the perceptions of childbirth, child-rearing, and marriage among a sample of African-American women matriculating within a postsecondary setting are explored.

Key words: Intersectionality theory, single African-American mothers, marriage, childbirth, African-American family

Some white, middle-class, college-educated women argued that motherhood was a serious obstacle to women's liberation.... Had black women voiced their
views on motherhood, it would not have been named a serious obstacle to our freedom as women. Black women would not have said motherhood prevented us from entering the world of paid work because we have always worked.... Historically, black women have identified work in the context of family as humanizing labor, work that affirms their identity as women, as human beings showing love and care, the very gestures of humanity that white supremacist ideology claimed black people were incapable of expressing. (hooks, 2000, p. 133)

Statistics released by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in recent years suggest that an increase in educational attainment among women has not resulted in a sustained decrease in out-of-wedlock births among women of all races and ethnicities (2010). Between 2002 and 2006, there was a noticeable decrease in out-of-wedlock births among all racial and ethnic groups. However, data collected during 2007 and 2008 demonstrated a sharp increase in out-of-wedlock births among women of all racial and ethnic groups, despite historical trending data that indicate increased levels of education among women (CDC, 2010). While there was a slightly lower rate of out-of-wedlock births in 2009, 41 percent of all births were to unmarried women (CDC, 2011). Although there has been an increase across the board among older age groups, Black women, along with Hispanic and American Indian women, continue to have children out of wedlock at a disproportionately higher rate than White and Asian women (CDC, 2011).

This is of particular interest considering African-American women are increasingly attaining higher levels of education in comparison to previous generations of African-American women. Still, despite attaining higher levels of education, African-American women continue to have higher levels of out-of-wedlock births in comparison to women of other racial and ethnic groups. For this reason, this exploratory analysis seeks to examine the perceptions of childbirth, marriage, and post-partum career pursuits among a sample of undergraduate African-American women matriculating to enter the professional workforce. These perceptions may reveal factors and
perspectives that potentially contribute to the continuing disparities in out-of-wedlock childbirths among educated African-American women. In addition, study participants were asked their opinions regarding society's and their respective families' views of respondents' likelihood to wed, have children, and participate in the workforce. The investigators aimed to discern potentially relevant patterns reflecting the perceptions of marriage, childbirth, and post-childbirth careers among the selected sample within a socio-historical context.

Literature Review

Recent figures released by the Center for Disease Control show the number of children born to unwed mothers climbed to 1.7 million nationwide in 2009 (CDC, 2011). This number is unprecedented, as it is the first time in history that four out of 10 births were to unwed mothers (CDC, 2011). In the past, the majority of births to unwed mothers were to teenagers, but recent analyses have determined that less than one-fourth of women who gave birth to children out of wedlock were teenagers (CDC, 2011). The remaining proportion of children born to unwed mothers was born to women aged 20 and over (CDC, 2011).

Statistics demonstrate that, during 2002-2006, there was a 12 percent increase in the number of babies born to unwed African-American women and a nine percent increase in the number of babies born to unwed Whites (CDC, 2009). Although there was a slight decline in fertility rates among all racial and ethnic groups in 2009, statistics show that the rate at which Black women gave birth to children out of wedlock during this period remained higher than any other racial or ethnic group (CDC, 2011).

The rate at which African-American women are obtaining higher levels of education is also increasing. In 2006, African-Americans earned more than 140,000 Bachelor's degrees, illustrating a greater than 100 percent increase in the number of Bachelor's degrees earned by African-Americans in the year 1990 ("Number of Blacks," 2008). Moreover, more than half of the 140,000 Bachelor's degrees were earned by African-American women ("Number of Blacks," 2008). Similar findings were presented by the American Council on Education
which recently reported that women account for 63 percent of all African-American undergraduates (2010). Trends in the attainment of graduate and professional degrees among African-Americans remained the same with women earning more than 70 percent and 63 percent of the aforementioned degrees respectively ("Number of Blacks," 2008). More recent statistics reveal that, in 2009, African-American women continued to account for more than 70 percent of African-Americans enrolled in graduate programs, while White women accounted for close to 60 percent of Whites enrolled in graduate programs ("Gender Gap," 2012). Previously released statistics illustrate that 67.5 percent of African-American women and 57.8 percent of White women were in pursuit of graduate degrees at the beginning of the decade ("Gender Gap," 2012). Thus, both groups are pursuing graduate degrees at higher rates, with African-American women demonstrating even greater rate increases and overall graduate program enrollments.

Higher levels of education typically facilitate higher levels of health literacy and greater access to resources (Kiefer, 2001; Pappas, Hadden, Kozak, & Fisher, 1997; Schillinger, Grumbach, & Piette, 2002). Accordingly, one would assume that an increase in educational attainment would result in a decrease in out-of-wedlock births, as a college educated person would have the knowledge of and ability to access available resources to prevent unintended pregnancies.

It should be noted that as African-American women attain post-graduate degrees, they are less likely to have children out-of-wedlock (National Vital Statistics System, 2007). Still, among those women who are college educated, African-American women with Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees accounted for 23 percent and 24 percent of out-of-wedlock births respectively (National Vital Statistics System, 2007). Again looking at African-American women with undergraduate and graduate degrees specifically, those in the 25 to 29 and 30 to 34 age groups accounted for a sizable portion of out-of-wedlock births among college educated African-American women. The CDC attributes the overall increase in out-of-wedlock births across racial and ethnic groups to a range of causes, including the increase of non-marital cohabitation, the wait to get married at older ages, and contraceptive effectiveness, among other things (CDC, 2009).
The rate at which African-American women conceive, deliver, and rear children out-of-wedlock has been intensely studied for the last three to four decades. In particular, past or early studies of out-of-wedlock births among African-American women have been conducted in a manner that has resulted in depicting many in the African-American or Black community as being deviant, uneducated, irresponsible, and/or sexually “free” (Roebuck & McGee, 1977; Staples, 1974). The most notable and oft-cited study, the Moynihan Report, painted the African-American community as being one replete with absent fathers and dominant mothers ("The Negro Family," 1965). This illustration had far reaching and long-lasting impacts on the images of Black motherhood.

Recent and older analyses have also examined the role of the family structure in which African-American adolescent females grow and develop on their perceptions of out-of-wedlock births (Garrison, 2007; Hill, Yeung, & Duncan, 2001; Roebuck & McGee, 1977). Moreover, several studies and analyses have probed whether having a legal spouse within the home is a significant determinant of conception and childbirth among African-American women (Garrison, 2007; Haney, Michielutte, Cochrane, & Vincent, 1975; Loomis & Landale, 1994; Manning, 2001; Wax, 2007). With the exception of Garrison (2007), the aforementioned studies provided minimal insight into the roles that larger historically-driven structural forces have played in shaping the perceptions of out-of-wedlock births among women within the African-American community. While the above referenced studies expanded understanding on the role of family structure and its impact on shaping individuals’ perceptions of premarital sex and definitions of illegitimacy, they were done outside of the context of the socio-historical forces that have significantly impacted the Black family.

A few scholars in particular have looked at the African-American family within the context of past and present realities, driven by the political economy (Patterson, 1998). The most significant factor for many African-Americans is the legacy of slavery. It is widely documented that the economic system of slavery prevented the legal formation of family among enslaved Blacks via a range of practices, including the restriction of marriage between the enslaved, the auctioning
off and selling of fathers and children, and the ban on marriage between Black women and the White fathers of their children (Hill, 2006; Martinot, 2007). When enslaved African women were permitted to keep their children, they were often left to raise them alone or within in a communal setting with other enslaved mothers, as a result of the above practices and/or restrictions (Garrison, 2007; Hill, 2006).

Raising children within a communal setting has seemingly continued, as it is not uncommon for single African-American women to build networks to help in raising their children (Jarrett, Jefferson, & Kelly, 2010; Miller-Cribbs & Farber, 2008; Randolph, 1995). Often times, in addition to the fathers of their children and family members, these networks consist of other single African-American mothers who work cooperatively to help one another with day care, the exchange of material resources, and emotional support (Hill-Collins, 2000; Jarrett et al., 2010; Nobles, 1974; Randolph, 1995; Stack, 1974). As such, practices surrounding child-rearing that began during slavery have sustained their existence.

The continued existence of kin networks and communal child-rearing have been a necessity due to slavery’s byproduct—racial discrimination. The political economy has historically placed racial and ethnic minorities, and more specifically, African-Americans, in a place of disadvantage (Cohn & Fossett, 1996; Couch & Fairlie, 2010; Dickerson, 2007; Dozier, 2010; Quillian, 2003, Turner, 2010; Wilson, 1996). Due to systemic pay disparities experienced by Black men, Black women were forced into the paid labor market (Coleman, 2003; Juhn & Potter, 2006; Landry & Jendrek, 1978; Quillian, 2003; Wilson, 1996). Simply stated, before the feminist movement of the 1950’s that advocated for a woman’s right to work outside of the home, African-American women were already fulfilling integral labor roles inside and outside of the home (Landry & Jendrek, 1978; Painter & Shafer, 2011).

As a result, African-American women have long had to balance the demands of their work inside and outside of the household. Because of this now longstanding tradition, one could contend that African-American women, both married and single, firmly believe that childbirth, and subsequently raising a family, by no means excludes the pursuit of a career.
In comparison to African-American women in previous generations, African-American women in current generations are pursuing professional careers at a greater rate (Kaba, 2008; "Number of Blacks," 2008). Thus, for professionally accomplished, single women who are financially able to support a child on their own, marriage may be obsolete. Choosing to have a child alone may also simply be a matter of a lack of a suitable spouse. Studies conducted with African-American female college students found that they wished to marry someone who is more successful professionally (Ganong, Coleman, Thompson, & Goodwin-Watkins, 1996). Statistics cited previously demonstrate that the ratio between college-educated African-American females and males can make meeting this goal quite difficult. Therefore, it is possible that some African-American women currently obtaining post-secondary degrees may likely decide to forego marriage and have children out-of-wedlock while still pursuing their respective career goals. Conversely, other African-American woman may experience unintended or out-of-wedlock births while waiting for their ideal mate or husband.

Theoretical Framework

While feminist theory has traditionally been applied to effectively examine the historical experiences of White women, it struggled to provide a comprehensive analytical lens through which the experiences of African-American women could be explored or even understood (Crenshaw, 2000; hooks, 2000). Thus, it is imperative that the personal and professional experiences of African-American women be examined via a theoretical framework that accurately takes into account what it has meant, and and what it continues to mean, to simultaneously belong to marginalized racial and gender groups.

Intersectionality theory asserts that social constructs cannot be examined as separate oppressive forces. Instead, social constructs such as race, gender, class, and age must be acknowledged and examined as reciprocating and overlapping systems of power that serve to create a continuum of oppression. Accordingly, the extent of oppression experienced by individuals is determined by their location within the social
hierarchy designed by the aforementioned intersecting and coinciding forces (Hill-Collins, 2000). Pointedly, the degree to which one experiences oppression within the power structure created by the intersecting systems of domination and marginalization is dependent upon their race, gender, and class (Hill-Collins, 2000; hooks, 2000). Such oppression often manifests in one’s personal and professional lives.

The intersection of race and gender is a precarious one that continues to have an indelible impact on the lived experiences of African-American women, in particular. Historically, African-American women have often found themselves at the bottom of the social hierarchy due to the cumulative effects of racism and sexism (Crenshaw, 2000; hooks, 2000). Thus, the vastly different historical experiences of White and African-American women within the United States has greatly influenced the perceptions, and resulting practices, of both populations in the context of family formation and their participation in the paid workforce.

As detailed in Hill-Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* (2000), African-American, female domestic workers of the 1950's made concerted efforts to send their daughters to college to propel them into professional careers and prevent them from becoming members of the working class. As a result of this, African-American women obtained college degrees in large numbers during subsequent decades. However, African-American males were disproportionately, and thus noticeably, absent from college campuses, leaving many African-American women without potential marriage partners (Hill-Collins, 2000). As a result, many African-American women have chosen to forego beginning a family or have opted to begin one alone.

**Methods**

Data used in the present analysis were collected through a multi-national survey project initiated by Japan’s Okayama Prefectural University in 2008. The survey, entitled The Life Course Survey, was administered in nine countries, including the United States.
Sample

Utilizing a convenience sampling method, data were obtained from students attending post-secondary institutions leading to a Bachelor's degree within the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. All respondents had to be undergraduate students currently matriculating at the survey institution. Of the 426 respondents who participated in the survey within the United States' segment of the survey, 37 self-identified as African-American females. Each of the 37 African-American females included in the final sample indicated that they were not married at the time of the survey.

Survey Instrument

Lead investigators from each of the nine countries provided input and guidance into the development of the survey instrument. The self-administered, paper and pencil instrument contained a range of statements designed to gain information regarding perceptions of future plans for marriage, childbearing/child-rearing and workforce participation. In addition, their perceptions of societal and familial expectations of them in respect to the above topics were also explored as part of the survey. After reading statements regarding future marital, childbearing, and workforce participation, respondents were asked to mark whether they: (1) absolutely had no plans; (2) really do not expect to; (3) somewhat expect to; or (4) very much expect to pursue them in the future. Subsequent to collecting completed questionnaires, data were manually entered into an SPSS database for analysis.

It should be noted that the questionnaire in the United States incorporated additional items in order to collect demographic information pertaining to race and academic classification, in particular.

Statistical Analysis

For the present analysis, data were examined using SPSS version 19. Analyses conducted included frequencies and percentages to demonstrate differences in respondents' perceptions of various topics. Similarly, frequencies and percentages were employed to demonstrate differences and
similarities among the views of respondents, respondents' perceived views of their parents and family members, respondents' perceived views of friends, and respondents' perceived views of society in regards to childbirth, marriage, and careers.

Study Limitations

The present analysis utilizes a relatively small sample. The use of a small sample prevents the accurate implementation of causal or correlational analyses due to large margins of error. Moreover, a sample size such as that used in this analysis prevents the generalization of results (Elifson, Runyon, & Haber, 1998). As such, the results generated in the present analysis may be used strictly to determine the potential for conducting a future, larger study.

Findings

Marriage

Of the 37 respondents, 33 (89%) said they plan to get married at some point in the future. Only four of the survey respondents (11%) indicated they did not have a plan to marry at any point in the future. Twenty-two respondents (60%) replied that it would be neither difficult nor easy to get married, with ten respondents (27%) perceiving it would be difficult to get married. Interestingly, while they appeared fairly optimistic about the ease of getting married, they were not so clear on their opportunities for marriage. Fourteen respondents (38%) thought marriage opportunities would be neither difficult nor easy compared to almost 12 respondents (32%) who thought it would be difficult. However, a smaller number respondents, 11 (30%), thought marriage opportunities would be easy to find.

When looking at the perceived expectations of parents, siblings/relatives, friends, and society, the respondents mostly indicated that it was somewhat or very much expected of them to get married. Results indicated that 21 respondents (57%) thought it was very much expected of them to get married by their parents as compared to only 13 respondents (35%) who indicated that it is very much expected of them by society. None of the respondents perceived their parents had no expectations of them getting married, compared to seven respondents
who did not think society expected them to be married. Examining how personal desire aligned with perceived expectations related to marriage, 35 respondents (94%) who indicated that they want to get married perceive that it is expected of them by their parents. Similarly, close to 33 respondents (88%) perceived that marriage was expected of them by their relatives, while 30 (81%) indicated that is expected of them by their friends. However, a lesser number of respondents thought it was expected of them by society. Approximately 29 respondents (77%) replied that it is their belief that society expects them to get married.

Similar to those who planned to get married, all of the respondents who indicated they did not want to get married thought it was expected of them by their parents. When it came to the expectations of their family regarding marriage, the respondents who did not want to get married were evenly split between perceiving their family did not expect them to get married and wanting them to get married. The respondents were asked two questions related to their views of marriage as it relates to their parents and friends. Of those who did not want to marry in the future, one-half responded that the question was not applicable, while the other half responded they did not envy couples such as their parents. Conversely, nine (25%) of those who wanted to get married indicated the question was not applicable. The remaining 28 respondents (75%) were evenly split regarding feeling any envy of relationships such as those of their parents.

Children

It is important to note that according to the data, at least one respondent had a child at the time of the survey. Additionally, only 34 survey respondents completed the survey question regarding future plans for children. Hence, of those who responded to the question, 33 (97%) indicated they wanted to have children in the future. Only one respondent (3%) replied that they do not want children at all.

When asked about the ease of having and raising children, 16 survey participants (43%) perceived that it would neither be difficult nor easy to have and raise children. Seventeen respondents (46%) replied that having and raising children would be
difficult for them. Only four respondents (11%) thought that having and raising children would be easy.

When looking at the perceived expectations of their parents, siblings/relatives, friends, and society, the respondents mostly indicated it was somewhat or very much expected of them to have children. Nineteen respondents thought both their parents and society very much expected them to have children. None of the respondents perceived that their parents or society had no expectation of them to have children. Only three respondents (8%) stated that it was their perception that their siblings/relatives did not expect them to have children, and only one responded (3%) that her friends did not expect her to have children.

When looking at those who want to have children in particular, 33 indicated (88%) it was expected of them by their parents. Thirty-one (84%) also perceived this was expected of them by other members of their family. All of the respondents perceived it was expected of them by society to have children, regardless of their personal desire to have children.

**Career**

Twenty-eight of the respondents (76%) indicated that working for the rest of their lives fit into the plan for their lives, as compared to nine respondents (24%) who stated they would only work if they had to. An overwhelming majority (98%) responded that working was expected of them by their parents, family, and friends. In fact, none thought it was not expected of them by these groups. Likewise, when asked about society's expectations, 34 participants (92%) replied that it was their perception that society expects them to work. Only three survey participants (8%) indicated society has no expectation of them working.

**Overall Perceptions**

Close to 30 respondents (80%) indicated they often hear that marriage, birth, and child-rearing are difficult from people around them and the media. Despite this, almost 36 respondents (97%) want to get married and have children. Looking at the total perceptions of marriage, children and work, results indicate that 25 of those surveyed (67%) believe they would get
married and have children and continue working for the rest of their life. Eight respondents (22%) answered that they will get married, have children and discontinue working once they get married or when their children are born.

Discussion and Conclusion

In summary, as indicated in the preceding section, most of the respondents indicated that they would like to get married at some point subsequent to the completion of their undergraduate studies. Although more than half of the respondents did not foresee any difficulty getting married, only a minority of survey participants indicated that opportunities for marriage would be easy. This may explain why four of the respondents indicated that they see no plans for marriage at all in the future. Still, only one respondent replied that she has no intentions of having children at any point subsequent to graduation. Simply put, a larger proportion of participants indicated that they plan to have children than get married at some point in the future. The perceptions of survey respondents in regards to marriage and children may reflect the increasingly growing acceptance of out-of-wedlock births within society. Recent findings released by the Pew Research Center have revealed that out-of-wedlock births among younger persons, regardless of race or ethnicity, have become a cultural ubiquity (Fry & Cohn, 2011). Reasons for the growing acceptance of out-of-wedlock births across the racial and ethnic spectrum often vary. While many women may experience unplanned pregnancies, others may decide to forego what was once the traditional route and have a child as a single parent.

The vast majority of respondents also indicated that it was the expectation of their parents, other relatives, and friends that they get married. However, a smaller number of survey participants responded that they believe society shares the same expectation. Conversely, all of the respondents noted that they believe society and their parents expect them to have children. Thus, while it was the perception of respondents that their respective friends and families expect them to get married at some point, it was also their belief that society in general has a lesser expectation of them in terms of marriage. Nevertheless,
survey respondents unanimously responded that it was their perception overall that society and their parents expect for them to have children at some point. That survey respondents overwhelmingly indicated that it was their perception that they are expected to have children to a greater extent than to get married may suggest a few reciprocating and intersecting factors related to race and gender.

As detailed earlier, a range of socio-historical and structural factors have likely impacted the overall perception of those within society. One of the least forgettable is the institution of slavery which forced enslaved African women to produce offspring for the expansion of slavery and the profitability of the slave owners. For over three centuries, enslaved African women were physically violated to ensure the continuous supply of free labor (Calomiris & Pritchett, 2009). In order to substantiate their actions, slave owners described enslaved African women as innately licentious, making slave owners vulnerable to their alleged seductive powers and less responsible for their behaviors (Harris-Perry, 2011; Muliawan & Kleiner, 2001).

Although slavery was legally abolished almost 150 years ago, the stereotypical depiction of African-American women as impious and wanton continues to plague the conscience of mainstream American society, and thus continues to be the lens through which African-American women are generally viewed. In terms of reproductive behaviors and mothering in particular, African-American women have frequently and openly been portrayed as conceiving children out-of-wedlock simply to obtain monetary resources provided by government entities (Harris-Perry, 2011; Williams, 2003). Learning to resist such stereotypes and portrayals has become part of the lived experience for many African-American women (Hill-Collins, 2000; James, 2010). Nonetheless, African-American women remain acutely aware of such stereotypes existing within the larger society.

This was revealed in a qualitative study of adolescent African-American girls ranging in ages from 15-21. In trying to gain greater insight into the participants’ perceived importance of gendered racism within American society, it was deduced that the intersecting realities of race and gender had a greater impact than race or gender as separate forces. In
particular, focus group participants shared that they were very much aware of the stereotypes associated with Black women from a very young age (Thomas, Hacker, & Hoxha, 2011). For this reason, like the focus group participants, participants within the present survey may also possess an acute awareness of the ongoing stereotypes of African-American women. Thus, their overwhelming indication that it is their perception that society expects them to have children more frequently than it expects them to get married may be a reflection of such stereotypes.

As noted previously, African-American mothers have raised, and continue to raise, their children with the assistance of other relatives, including grandmothers and fictive kin (Jarrett et al., 2010; Miller-Cribbs & Farber, 2008; Randolph, 1995). The cooperation of grandmothers, aunts, fictive kin, sisters, friends, and others in the raising of children continues to be an instrumental cultural asset among single African-American mothers (Hill-Collins, 2000; Jarrett et al., 2010; Nobles, 1974; Randolph, 1995; Stack, 1974). It is this particular cultural asset that has made it possible for many African-American single mothers to start a family outside of the legal institution of marriage while continuing to pursue their professional endeavors. For this reason, many of those respondents who indicated that they expected to have children more so than marry may have experienced or witnessed the common and effective raising of children outside of legal marriage with the support of communal networks.

Survey results also revealed that the majority of respondents plan to return to work should they ever have children. These findings may reflect a trend that has maintained its momentum for the last two to three decades—women returning to the workforce shortly after childbirth (Mather, 2012). Although there was a time when it was expected of women to remain home to raise children and manage the home, this is no longer the case. Beginning in the late 1980s, increasingly more women have returned to the paid workforce once their maternity leave ends (Juhn & Potter, 2006; Klerman & Leibowitz, 1994). However, this has long been the reality for African-American women. Due to the historically dismal economic realities facing African-American families, African-American women have often had to engage in the paid labor force in order to
help ends meet (Juhn & Potter, 2006). Plainly phrased, African-American women rarely had the luxury of staying home to focus solely on their domestic responsibilities (hooks, 2000). Instead, African-American women often had to shoulder the burdens of fiscal responsibilities while meeting the needs of their respective families (Ferell Fouquier, 2011; Juhn & Potter, 2006; Quillian, 2003).

Yet again, one cannot discount the effects of slavery on the American psyche. For three centuries, just like enslaved males, enslaved African women were required to endure hours of labor. Moreover, enslaved African women were required to do such within the worst of inhumane conditions (Muliawan & Kleiner, 2001). The labor of African-American women under extreme circumstances almost from the time of their initial arrival in this country perpetuated the perception of them by the larger American society as less than human or superhuman even, and therefore, incapable of experiencing a range of human emotions, including exhaustion, anxiety, and/or the desire to nurture a child or family (Muliawan & Kleiner, 2001; Pyke, 2010). Consequently, African-American women have traditionally been expected to continue working shortly after childbirth.

Likewise, once slavery ended, African-American women were often employed as domestic workers, regularly working long hours under less than dignified circumstances (Ferell Fouquier, 2011). As noted by hooks, “from slavery to the present day, black women in the U.S. have worked outside the home, in the fields, in the factories, in the laundries, in the homes of others” (2000, p. 133). Consequently, many African-American women have traditionally returned to work shortly after childbirth in order to help support their respective families. Thus, African-American women’s dual labor inside of and outside of the home has been a long-standing practice. That African-American women are increasingly obtaining post-secondary degrees also contributes to their likelihood of pursuing work or professional careers outside of the home while simultaneously raising a family. The expressed desire to get married as well as have children by survey respondents may be a reflection of middle class values often associated with those who obtain post-secondary education. However, as noted previously, the lack of suitable partners may leave many professional African
American women to go it alone in terms of raising a family; this reflects an enigmatic juxtaposition of middle class ideals and the collective, historical experience of African-American women in the United States.

The present study provided a glimpse of the perceptions of a sample of African-American female college students regarding marriage, childbirth, and careers. Taking into consideration the previously outlined findings, future research should focus on probing the perceptions of marriage, childbirth, and careers in larger samples of African-American women attending post-secondary institutions.

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