

The Portrayal of African American Romantic Relationships in Popular Print

by

Marika L. Martin, M.S., CFLE  
Doctoral Candidate

A Dissertation

In

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY THERAPY

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty  
of Texas Tech University in  
Partial Fulfillment of  
the Requirements for  
the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Approved by

Dr. Karen Wampler

Dr. David Ivey

Dr. Richard Wampler

Dr. Peggy Gordon Miller  
Dean of the Graduate School

May, 2011

Copyright 2011  
Marika Martin

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

God is so amazing! Completing this chapter in my life could not have been possible without the consistent love and support that I received from my family, my advisor, my dissertation committee, the faculty at Texas Tech, mentors and friends. Often times as humans we think that we have the perfect plan but the Lord has a different plan for us and he places people in our lives at the correct time for specific reasons according to his plan.

I truly believe that I am not an island that stands alone but that through supportive relationships and a good family foundation, I was able to achieve this rare and distinguished triumph. I am overjoyed about this journey that I was allowed to finish that many are not able to complete.

To Dr. Karen Wampler my dissertation chairperson I am forever grateful that you continued to believe in me. Although you left Texas Tech, you kept your word and never left me! Thank you for being firm, for challenging me and correcting me with love when I was not on task. I would like to thank Dr. Roy Bean who was my original program advisor when I began the MFT program. You remained in contact with me and continued to support me throughout this process after moving on to brighter days. Your friendship and unfailing support has been pivotal during this journey. I would like to thank Dr. Steve Harris for stepping into the role of dissertation chairperson with a cheerful heart and warm smile prior to moving onto brighter days. To Dean Ferguson thank you so very much for your willingness to serve on my committee, your involvement was essential and invaluable. To Dr. Richard Wampler, your brutal honesty yet huge heart

and love has helped push me to higher levels. To Dr. David Ivey the last of the original great faculty members of Texas Tech University's MFT program, thank you for your warm heart, great hugs, genuine concern for students and willingness to step in to the role as my dissertation chair.

I am forever indebted to the incredible faculty and students that made up the MFT program at Texas Tech University. Your continued support and encouragement is a part of this puzzle that helped me to accomplish this great endeavor.

I would like to thank my two coders who graciously accepted their role and who played a significant part in the completion of this process. You helped make this research study a success.

I would like to thank my parents whom of which I could not have prayed for a better set of parents. When things were the toughest in my life I knew that I could always rely on your unconditional love and stability. I would like to thank my Granddaddy who has always been in my corner and I only wish that my other grandparents were here to share in this great accomplishment. I would like to thank my brothers who loved me, took care of Semien, cared for me when I was sick and traveled back and forth to Texas from Maryland with me. I would like to thank my best friend, my love and significant other. Your patience, love, friendship and understanding have been refreshing and such a beautiful blessing in my life. Your love shines through as you continued to stand by my side along this period of time in my life.

Lastly, I would like to thank the remainder of my loving family and all my friends who went above and beyond to assist me in accomplishing my goal. I am so grateful for

the prayers, the tutoring sessions, the proof reading, the phone calls, the hugs, the food, the financial support, the pep talks and the pseudo therapy sessions. Thank you to all who continued to ask how my dissertation was going although that was the last thing that I wanted to discuss! I truly believe your cheering for me and unfailing encouragement is what sustained me. You all believed in me when I struggled to believe in myself.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	ii
ABSTRACT .....	ix
LIST OF TABLES.....	xi
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Statement of Problem .....	4
Theoretical Perspective .....	5
Research Questions .....	7
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	8
Problem.....	8
Marriage Rate and Never Married.....	8
Divorce Rate.....	9
Why African Americans Are Not Marrying.....	10
Married Couples and Children in Poverty.....	11
Fear for the African American Family.....	11
Historical Context.....	12
Socialization of Gender.....	13
Socialization of African American Females.....	14
Socialization of African American Males.....	15
Family Structure.....	16
Kinship.....	17

Demographic Factors.....	18
Education.....	18
Employment.....	20
Incarceration.....	23
Homicide and HIV/AIDS.....	25
Mate Availability and Sex Ratio Imbalance .....	27
Status and Class.....	29
Intrapersonal and Interpersonal Factors.....	29
Internalized Racism in AA Males.....	29
Internalized Racism in AA Females.....	31
Attractiveness Defined.....	33
Interpersonal Factors.....	34
Structure and Roles.....	34
Stereotypes.....	35
Interracial Relationships.....	36
Present Study.....	37
What African Americans Believe.....	38
<b>CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY.....</b>	<b>40</b>
Sample.....	40
Content Analysis.....	43

Reliability of Coding.....	45
Training of Coders.....	46
Analysis.....	47
CHAPTER IV: RESULTS.....	50
Reliability of Coding.....	50
Reliability of Codes-Categorical Variables.....	50
Reliability of Codes-Continuous Variables.....	55
Role of Gender.....	61
Causes.....	71
Family, Church, Community Involvement.....	75
Solutions.....	77
Unanticipated Codes.....	78
Descriptive Statistics.....	83
CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION.....	91
Findings.....	94
Overall View of Marriage.....	94
Gender Roles.....	94
Causes.....	97
Solution and Positive Factors.....	100
Implications for Marriage and Family Therapy.....	101
Implications for Future Research.....	103
Limitations of the Study.....	104



Conclusion.....	105
REFERENCES.....	107
APPENDIX: References of 60 articles coded.....	120

## ABSTRACT

The rate of marital unions has been steadily declining throughout the years across cultures. However, in the African American culture this rate has been declining at a faster rate and a larger margin. The investigator was interested in the portrayal of African American relationships in popular print. Content analysis was used in this study to describe how African American relationships were depicted in *Ebony* and *Essence* magazines. A codebook was developed by thematically grouping together references made about romantic relationships. These references were descriptive of the attitudes toward men, attitudes toward women and attitudes toward relationships. The sample consisted of 60 magazine articles in *Ebony* and *Essence* magazines within the time periods of 1995, 2000 and 2005 that pertained to African American relationships. Out of the sixty articles coded in the category of the “view of marriage” there was almost an even split between articles in which African American relationships were seen as no problem or a minor problem and those coded as a serious problem or in a crisis. The code related to view of marriage, “change over time,” demonstrated that there was little change across the sixty articles that were coded. In the area of gender, out of the sixty articles coded tension between male and female relationships was found neither high nor low. The codes relating to whose fault (male or female), suggest that females were more to blame. Social and economic factors were portrayed as one of the largest influences on the state of African American relationships. One-way Analysis of Variance demonstrated that the variables ‘change over time’ and ‘social and economic factors’ were statistically significant by magazine. *Essence* magazine more than *Ebony* was likely to present the

point of view that African American relationships had become worse over time and more likely to suggest that the state of the African American relationship was due to social and economic factors. In addition, social and economic factors as causes of problems in African American relationships were discussed less in the year 2005 than in 1995. Findings from this study suggest that *Ebony* and *Essence* magazines present material that contains an overall positive view of African American relationships. The discussions in the articles were not skewed toward one particular gender, view, time period or magazine. Many factors included in the literature were expected to be reflected in the articles in these popular magazines oriented towards African Americans; however, the articles did not focus on problems related to interracial dating, the independence of females, or the lack of trustworthiness of males.

## LIST OF TABLES

Number of Articles on Romantic Relationships.....	43
Overall View of Marriage.....	51
Change over Time.....	52
Tensions between males and females.....	52
Is it male’s fault?.....	53
Is it female’s fault?.....	53
Positive Factors.....	54
Popular Culture.....	55
Family Church and Community Involvement.....	55
View of Marriage.....	59
Change Over Time.....	60
Tension between Males and Females.....	62
Whose Fault.....	63
Expectations.....	66
Dating and Gender Roles.....	67
Social and Economic Causes.....	72
Popular Culture.....	74
Family, Church and Community Involvement.....	76
Positive Factors.....	78
Other Factors- Honesty.....	79
Other Factors- Commitment.....	80

Other Factors-Goals.....	80
Other Factors-Quality.....	81
Other Factors-Preference.....	82
One Way Analysis of Variance for View of Marriage, Change Over Time, Tensions between Males and Females, Social and Economic Factors by Magazine.....	84
One Way Analysis of Variance for View of Marriage, Change Over Time, Tensions between Males and Females, Social and Economic Factors by Year of Magazine.....	85
One Way Analysis of Variance for View of Marriage, Change Over Time, Tensions between Males and Females, Social and Economic Factors by Gender of Author.....	86
Magazine by Male’s Fault.....	87
Magazine by Female’s Fault.....	88
Year of Magazine by Whose Fault Males.....	89
Year of Magazine by Whose Fault Females.....	90

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

African American marriages are twice as likely to end in divorce as white marriages (Dickson, 1993; Patterson, 1995). All aspects of life, especially marriage and family relationships, have been heavily influenced by the harsh treatment received by African Americans (Pinderhughes, 2002). There is belief among many scholars that the African American male has never recovered and the cycle of oppression has been funneling down generations of men ever since (Patterson, 1995; Pinderhughes, 2002; Trent, 1991).

Patterson (1995) discussed the theory of gender oppression in the African American culture that has been pervasive since slavery. He stated that there is a continued theme of oppression, demoralization, and death of the soul and spirit of the African American male and that African American women have always, at least in part, been generative, empowered and humanized. It has been often stated that slavery did not destroy African American women in the same manner that it destroyed African American men. African American men were not allowed to be fathers, husbands, or even brothers. Even for women, racism and sexism are the negative messages they have received throughout the years from the media, schools, the mental health field, and sometimes even their own families about their worth, intelligence, capability and beauty (Boyd-Franklin & Franklin, 1998).

According to Boyd-Franklin and Franklin (1998) the greatest debate in the African American community is the relationship between males and females. Gender

roles and racism heavily affect the dynamics of the African American couple relationship (Boyd-Franklin & Franklin, 1998). Although African American women and men have progressed and have high achievements, the new generations' view of society concerning Black men and women has a profound effect as it sends mixed messages about Black male and female relationships.

Most social scientists attribute declining marriage rates among African American women to structural, social and economic factors such as the high sex-ratio imbalance among African Americans and the shortage of marriageable African American males (Billingsley, 1992; Darity & Myers, 1986; S.A. Hill, 2002; Lichter, McLaughlin, Kephart & Lardy, 1992; Staples, 1981; Staples & Johnson-Boulin, 1993; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995; Williams, 1990).

This study is important and differs from past research in that there was no research found that specifically looked at how African American romantic relationships were portrayed in the media. There is literature that discusses the influence of the media in general and the influence of the news media in particular on the African American culture as whole, but not specifically on romantic relationships. The understanding of self concept, socialization, values, attitudes and behavior of African American males and females alike is important in understanding couple relationships between African Americans.

One goal of this study is to explore what the media reports about romantic relationships among African American males and females. A sample was taken from articles on romantic relationships in popular magazines oriented toward the African

American population. Another goal of this research study is to educate and empower African Americans, clinicians and academicians who work with this culture to teach others about this culture. There is also hope that it will make people aware of the subtle and covert effects, whether negative or positive that the media has on society, in this case, African American heterosexual romantic relationships.

This subject matter is extremely important because some African Americans are unaware of the root of their problems. It is possible that people will stop blaming one another and become motivated to do something concerning their families and relationships. Attempts to promote healthier relationships, healthier marriages, and overall a healthier culture are also needed.

The impact of slavery and ongoing discrimination has been studied frequently. Understanding the Black media's description of Black romantic relationships can be beneficial to therapists because it is an innovative way to learn about the African American culture. Media have influenced many clients who enter a therapist's office; therefore, it is important to be aware of the possible influences on African American romantic relationships.

This study of how African American relationships are portrayed in popular print was conducted using a content analysis of all articles on romantic relationships published in 1995, 2000, and 2005 (approximately 60 issues) in the two most popular magazines oriented toward the African American population: *Ebony* and *Essence* magazines. The articles were coded for themes related to African American romantic relationships.



## Statement of Problem

Marriage has changed. The idealization of marriage, commitment and togetherness has changed. The integrity of the marital union has shifted across ethnic groups and cultures. However, the greatest demonstration of this shift is shown in the African American population. In 2004, 34% of African Americans aged 15 and older were married and 43% never married compared to 57% non-Hispanic Whites aged 15 and older married and 24% never married (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). The U.S. Census Bureau (2005) reported that non-Hispanic White families included nearly 53% married couples; in contrast, African American families included 29% married couples.

The African American Healthy Marriage Initiative (2007) reported that 35% of all Americans between the ages of 24 and 34 have never been married and this percentage is at a high of 54% in African Americans. Seventy-six per cent of American families are headed by married couples; however, in the African American population, only 48% of families are headed by married couples (African American Healthy Marriage Initiative, 2007). Although both sources of information have some inconsistencies neither of the reports are good surrounding the percentages of African American couples marrying.

There are significant demographic changes for families in the United States. There has been an overall decline in marriage rates, older ages at first marriage, a higher prevalence of births to unmarried women, increases in female-headed households, more children living in female-headed households, and a larger percentage of children living in poverty (Hutchinson, 1999). The United States is affected in its entirety by the decline in













































































































































































































































































