African American Marriages: Status, Quality, and Clarification

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Federal Healthy Marriage Initiative

Mission Statement:
- To help couples, who have chosen marriage for themselves, gain greater access to marriage education services, on a voluntary basis, where they can acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to form and sustain a healthy marriage (Administration for Children and Families website)
- In 2006, $100 million for Healthy Marriage Demonstration Grants and $50 million for Strengthening Fatherhood Grants.
African American Healthy Marriage Initiative

- The AAHMI was created to promote a culturally competent strategy for fostering healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood, improving child well-being, and strengthening families within the African American Community.
Marriage Education

- Movement started by Diane Solle, 1989
- Broad Definition include:
  - Skills-based group programs for the prevention and remediation of marital distress
  - Marital support groups normally labeled as marriage enrichment (Larson, 2004)
- Developed to aid couples
  - Enhance relationship quality
  - Improve satisfaction
  - Prevent divorce
Marriage Education Cont…

- Marriage Crises Intervention
- Coalition for Marriage and Family
- Couples Education
- Grants
  - Healthy Marriage Initiative – 2001
  - PAIRS Evaluation Project - 2006
Marriage Education Cont...

- Also called couples or relationship education
- Designed for persons in intimate relationship; married or not
- Curricula vary but most include:
  - Communication
  - Problem-Solving and relationship decision-making
  - Parenting skills
  - Benefits of healthy marriages and relationships on children

http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/about/mission.html
#goals
http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org/
Marriage

- How do you define marriage?
- What defines a marriage?
  - A salient aspect of emotional and financial well-being
  - “Marriage matters for African American Health” (Mellgren, 2007)
Benefits of Marriage

- Family
- Economics
- Physical Health and Longevity
- Mental Health
- Emotional Well-being
  - Wilcox & colleagues (2005)
Benefits for Children and Youth

- More likely to succeed academically
- Physically and emotionally healthier
- Less likely to abuse drugs or alcohol
- Less likely to commit delinquent behavior
- Have better relationships with mothers and fathers
- Less likely to become sexually active as a teenager
Benefits for Couples

- More satisfying relationship
- Physically and emotionally healthier
- Wealthier
- Longer Lifespan
- Decrease abuse of drugs and alcohol
- Decreased rate of violent crimes
- Stronger relationships with children
Benefits for Community

- Higher rates of physically and emotionally healthy citizens
- Higher rates of educated citizens
- Lower crime
- Lower rates of teenage pregnancy
- Higher rates of home ownership
- Decreased need for social services
Unwed Child-Bearing and Family Fragmentation

- Two to three times more likely to:
  - Drop out of high school
  - Be involved in juvenile justice system
  - Engage in sexual behaviors at an early age
  - Consume alcohol and drugs at an early age
  - Be absent from school
  - Not enroll in college
  - Earn less money as adults

- $112 Billion annual ($1.1 Trillion/decade) is taxpayer cost of divorce and unwed childbearing
Statistics Regarding AA Couples

- More likely to be separated or divorced (Belgrave & Allison, 2006)
- In the 1990s divorce rate for AA couples increased by 17%
  - (Martin & Bumpass, 1989)
- By 1998, the divorce rate among AA couples was the highest of any American ethnic minority group
  - (McKenry & Price, 2006; United States Census Bureau, 2000)
AA couples have the lowest marriage rates compared to other ethnic groups


Two to three times the divorce rate

(Pinderhughes, 2002; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995)

75% of African-American children are born to unwed parents
Research on AA Couples

- Scholars typically view Black families from a “deficit perspective”
- Emphasizes problems and pathology
  - Connor and White (2006)
- What are some of the following:
  - Cultural stereotypes
  - Gender stereotypes
AA Women

- Desire marriage
- Women are becoming
  - more educated
  - more independent
    - relying less on men for support
AA Men

- AA men often abandon their family responsibility.
- Want “to be the kind of father they [have] not experienced”
  - Coles (2006, p. 83)
- “Why get married when you got six to seven [women] to one guy, really . . . why get married when you can play the field?”
  - Wilson (2003, p. 15)
AA Marriages

- “Black couples who have a stronger role sharing [or egalitarian] orientation . . . are more stable than those who have a weaker role sharing orientation”
  - (Veroff, Douvan, & Hatchett, 1995, p. 158)
- Black couples who share household labor is a resource that seems to strengthen their marriages
AA Marriages Cont.

- Importance of AA faith communities
  - (Marks, Nesteruk, Swanson, Garrison, & Davis, 2005)

- Importance of prayer in AA marriages
  - (Beach & Hurt, 2009)
AA Marriage

Barriers include:
- Lack of education
- Employment opportunities
- Imbalanced gender ratio
- Limited mate availability
- Children from previous relationships
Study by Mark et. al (2008)

- “Together we are Strong”
  - All couples married an average of 26
  - All couples gave marital self-reports of “strong” and “happy”
- Qualitative study
- 30 couples
- Purposive sampling
  - Strong marriages
Themes Found

- Challenges in AA marriages
- Overcoming external challenges to marriage
- Resolving intramarital conflict
- Unity and the importance of being “equally yoked”
Findings

- Individual-level resources and barriers
  - Two happy individuals may often make a happy marriage
  - All had at least a GED
  - Wives had as much or more education than husbands
  - Physical, emotional and mental strength
    - Developed over the marital years
Findings Cont...

- Interpersonal Resources and Barriers
  - Trust is an important, perhaps essential, interpersonal resource in a strong, happy, enduring marriage
    - Mistrust is problematic in these marriages
  - Greatest = each other
Findings Cont…

- Social and Economic Resources and Barriers
  - Family impact and specifically parental influences
    - Single parent homes
  - Assisting to meet needs of extended family
    - Finances
    - Extended parenting
    - Aging/ailing parents
Findings Cont...

- Religion
  - Congregational attendance
  - Personal faith commitment
  - United participation in religious experience
    - Equal yoking
    - Together to church or at home
Program for stronger African American marriages

- University of Georgia
- Researchers Steven Beach and Tera Hurt
- Three year grant supported project
  - John Templeton Foundation
  - Administration for Children and Families
Program Status

- Results in 2009 pending
- Use of Marriage Education
  - Seeks to strengthen AA marriages
    - Standard marriage skills training and prayer
- Three groups
  - An established self-help program on their own
  - Small groups with a trained leader
  - Trained leader and a series of prayers that tie into skills being learned
Additional Research

- Dion’s Dissertation Research
- Nivischi’s Dissertation Research
Implications for Counselor Educators

- Healthy Marriage Initiative grants, Building Strong Families (BSF), and Supporting Healthy Marriages (SHM) projects all ended around 2011
  - Evidenced-based support for MRE with AA and other populations
  - Growth of parenting and family educators
  - Counselors not adequately represented at the ‘table’ regarding marriage education research or intervention
School and mental health counselors need to be prepared to work with growing number of young persons without adequate relationship role models.

Integration or addition of marriage and relationship education for students.
Implications for Counselors

- Keeping abreast with the latest information regarding the changing demographic trends
- Continuing education to increase multicultural competencies
- Increased knowledge concerning the counseling needs of different cultures
- Availability of resources for families at all levels (community, state, and federal)
Thank you!!

Questions,

Comments,

Concern?
References

References Cont…