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Romantic Relationships Among Unmarried African Americans and Caribbean Blacks: Findings From the National Survey of American Life*

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Abstract

This study investigated the correlates of relationship satisfaction, marriage expectations, and relationship longevity among unmarried African American and Black Caribbean (Caribbean Black) adults who are in a romantic relationship. The study used data from the National Survey of American Life, a national representative sample of African Americans and Caribbean Blacks in the United States. The findings indicated that the correlates of relationship satisfaction, expectations of marriage, and relationship longevity were different for African Americans and Black Caribbeans. For Black Caribbeans, indicators of socioeconomic status were particularly important correlates of relationship satisfaction. For African Americans, indicators of parental status were important for relationship longevity. Policy and practice implications for nonmarital unions are discussed.

Keywords

African Americans; Afro-Caribbeans; cohabitation; marriage; romantic relationships; socioeconomic status; West Indians

The number of unmarried adults in the United States has increased dramatically over the past four decades. The decline in marriage has been particularly pronounced among African Americans (African American Healthy Marriage Initiative, 2000). However, declining marriage rates do not mean a decline in romantic relationships. The majority of investigations on nonmarital unions focus primarily on transitions to marriage. Although

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these studies are important for identifying barriers and facilitating factors for marriage entry, they provide less information about the nature of romantic unions among unmarried adults that may or may not end in marriage. The focus of this investigation is to examine the correlates of relationship satisfaction, expectations of marriage, and relationship longevity among unmarried African Americans and Caribbean Blacks.

Studies of nonmarital romantic relationships among cohabiting and noncohabiting adults are important for at least two reasons. First, fewer cohabiting unions are resulting in marriage, and this is more likely the case for African Americans (Schoen & Owens, 1992) and Caribbean Blacks (Coppin, 2000). Consequently, there is growing recognition among researchers that not all cohabitations are part of the process leading to marriage and are instead alternative forms of union (Smock, 2000). Second, few studies account for whether unmarried respondents are coupled but not cohabiting.

Most studies examining social life among Black Americans have ignored the cultural and economic diversity within the Black population in the United States. Blacks are usually treated as a monolith, without regard to ancestry or ethnicity. Yet, the Black population in the United States is becoming more diverse each year, fueled in large part by the immigration of Blacks of Caribbean descent. In 1990, Blacks in the United States totaled about 30 million, and by 2000, the total had increased to 36.2 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005a). Of the nearly 4% of Blacks who were foreign born, 60% were from the Caribbean. Moreover, Caribbean Blacks make up 25% of the Black American population in major cities such as Boston, New York, Miami, and Fort Lauderdale (Logan & Deane, 2003, table 2). Accordingly, it is important to consider cultural, contextual, and demographic differences within the Black population that may be sources of variation in the nature of their romantic relationships.

Theories of Marital Behavior

A considerable body of research in sociology and demography focuses on the role of economic and demographic factors to explain changes in marital behavior among African Americans (e.g., Kielcolt & Fossett, 1995). Economic explanations generally seek to explain the decline in marriage by connecting these changes to the economic circumstance of men and women. Theories of mate availability highlight gender ratios and marriage market conditions as important demographic factors that effect the decision to marry among African Americans. Mate availability is usually measured by the gender ratio, that is, the number of men for every 100 women. Gender ratios for African Americans tend to be low (i.e., below 100), although they vary across metropolitan areas, counties, cities, and regions. Because of the chronic shortage of African American men relative to women, marriage market conditions are considered to be a likely explanation for the low marriage rates among African Americans.

Studies of marriage patterns and family formation among Caribbeans have primarily focused on economic explanations—namely, the impact of men (Coppin, 2000) and women's (St. Bernard, 2003) labor force participation and educational attainment on relationship formation. Caribbean women have experienced tremendous gains with regard to their participation in the labor force. Between 1970 and 2000, there were continual increases in female labor force participation rates in Jamaica, Barbados, and Trinidad and Tobago. Such increases not only are a function of several decades of women's educational achievements but also are often attributed to social movements that stimulated greater gender equity in social relations. Increases in labor market participation also revealed emergent trends in familial living arrangements resulting in single mothers who sought work to support their families. Although some earlier studies reported an association between higher socioeconomic status and common-law marriages, other studies of marital behavior among

Caribbeans generally supported the link between lower socioeconomic status and nonmarital romantic unions (Henriques, 1953). Other research suggested that the prevalence of common-law marriages in the Caribbean reflected the lack of bargaining power of the women who were willing to use such unions to improve their chances of marriage (Goode, 1960). Finally, work by Rodman (1971) suggested that although marriage was considered the “more respectable institution” by lower-class Afro-Trinidadian respondents, poverty was often cited as a factor that prevented them from marrying. However, a study by McKenzie (1993) reported a rising trend in common-law unions among persons of higher socioeconomic status.

The review of the literature of marriage and romantic involvement among Black Caribbeans highlights the diversity of this population and the importance of acknowledging cultural differences between African Americans and Black Caribbeans. Researchers of Black Caribbean life note that, consistent with many immigrant groups, Black Caribbeans hold strong cultural values that emphasize economic, educational, and material success. For example, the social networks of Caribbean Blacks have been credited with facilitating their abilities to create niches in housing and labor markets, start their own businesses, financially shore up network members who need assistance, and offer coresidence to help other immigrants establish themselves immediately following migration (Waters, 1999). This kind of support is not only cultural but also has implications for increasing the level of socioeconomic status for Caribbean Blacks relative to U.S.-born African Americans. Consequently, the ability to provide financial security in a relationship may not only be an expectation for persons in a romantic relationship but also may be more of a possibility for Caribbean Blacks relative to African Americans.

Overall, the empirical evidence suggests that among African Americans as well as Black Caribbeans, both economic and demographic factors have contributed to recent changes in marital behavior. A small body of work suggests that economic factors are integral to the formation and maintenance of intimate unions among African Americans (e.g., Ruggles, 1997) and may play a more prominent role in the quality and stability of their marriages (Clark-Nicolas & Gray-Little, 1991). Economic factors were found to be positively related to marital satisfaction and other dimensions of marital quality for African American men and women overall and were particularly relevant for those with lower incomes (Clark-Nicolas & Gray-Little).

Marriage and Romantic Relationships Among African Americans and Black Caribbeans

The decrease in the rates of marriage has been particularly striking among African Americans, who are less likely to be married than either Whites or Hispanics (Harknett & McLanahan, 2004). They are also more likely than Whites to be separated and divorced and less likely to remarry (Taylor, Tucker, Chatters, & Jayakody, 1997). Consequently, African Americans spend less time in marriage than Whites. This decreased rate of marriage does not mean that they are not involved in romantic relationships. For instance, Tucker and Taylor (1997) found that 4 of 10 unmarried African Americans and about half of those aged 55 years or younger were involved in romantic relationships. Romantic involvements were important even among unmarried elderly African Americans, with 1 of 10 indicating that they were romantically involved. Overall, one in three uninvolved African Americans expressed the desire to be in a relationship. In the same study, gender and age were significantly correlated with the likelihood of being involved in a romantic relationship, with men and younger adults having a higher likelihood of having a main romantic involvement.

Unmarried cohabitation has increased dramatically over the past three decades, climbing from 500,000 couples in 1970 to nearly 5 million couples in 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005b). Although cohabitation rates have increased more among Whites (Bumpass & Lu,

2000), African American women have higher overall probabilities of cohabiting compared to White women (Schoen & Owens, 1992). Moreover, although they hold similar expectations of marrying their cohabiting partners, African American women are less likely to make the transition from cohabitation to marriage (Raley & Bumpass, 2003), leading some scholars to conclude that cohabitation has become an alternative to marriage (Smock, 2000) or being single (Jayakody & Cabrera, 2002) among African Americans. Although few studies examine the determinants of cohabitation among African Americans, most racial comparison studies attribute delays in marriage, declines in marriage rates, and economic factors as contributing to the rising cohabitation rates among African Americans.

There is surprisingly little research on marriage and romantic involvement among Black Caribbeans. The literature on Black Caribbeans in the United States is mostly ethnographic and addresses issues such as immigration, discrimination, social mobility, and relationships with African Americans (Waters, 1999). Available studies, however, indicate that marriage rates have been consistently low over the past few decades and that consensual unions (i.e., visiting and common-law unions) have persisted alongside unions characterized by formal marriage for quite some time. Studies in Trinidad and Jamaica report that legal marriage was more likely to prevail among those with greater economic stability and higher social ranking (Henriques, 1953). Common-law marriages were more prevalent in rural than in urban parts of Trinidad, often representing 80% – 90% of all unions in rural districts (Matthews, 1952). Lower-class Afro-Guyanese viewed legal marriage as an upper-class symbol, its real significance being an act of conformity to “respectable” values (Smith, 1956). However, more recent work indicates that the prevalence of common-law unions has increased among women from middle and higher socioeconomic levels (McKenzie, 1993). This trend has been attributed to increasing tolerance of nonmarital unions in Western societies as well as the home-grown example of lower income Caribbean groups. Research in Trinidad and Tobago has found that there were approximately 20 unmarried-couple households for every 100 married-couple households (Coppin, 2000).

In the present investigation, we seek to address some gaps in existing knowledge about romantic unions among Black Americans. Specifically, the current study focuses on a wide range of outcomes that assess the nature of nonmarital romantic unions among African Americans and Caribbean Blacks. This study is unique in that it uses a national probability sample of African Americans and Black Caribbeans in the United States, which allows for the ability to examine both differences in romantic relationships and distinctive demographic, socioeconomic status, and relationship profiles and wider generalizability of study findings.

Methods

Data

The National Survey of American Life: Coping With Stress in the 21st Century (NSAL) was collected by the Program for Research on Black Americans (PRBA) at the University of Michigan’s Institute for Social Research (ISR). The fieldwork for the study was completed by ISR’s Survey Research Center (SRC) in cooperation with PRBA. The NSAL sample has a national multistage probability design. A total of 6,082 face-to-face interviews were conducted in 2001 – 2003 with persons aged 18 years or older, including 3,570 African Americans, 1,621 Blacks of Caribbean descent, and 891 non-Hispanic Whites. The response rate is 71.3%. The NSAL sample consists of 64 primary sampling units; 56 overlap substantially with existing SRC National Sample primary areas and the remaining 8 were chosen from the South in order to represent African Americans in proportion to their national distribution.

The African American sample is a national representative sample of households located in the 48 coterminous states with at least one Black adult aged 18 years or older who did not identify ancestral ties in the Caribbean. The Black Caribbean sample was selected from two area probability sampling frames—the core NSAL sampling frame and a probability sample of housing units from geographic areas with a relatively high density of Caribbean descent persons (more than 10% of the population). Of the total Black Caribbean respondents ($N = 1,621$), 265 respondents were selected from households in the core sample and 1,356 were selected from housing units in high Caribbean density areas (see Jackson et al., 2004).

Measures

Dependent variables—This analysis examines three dependent variables (relationship satisfaction, expectations of marriage, and relationship longevity). *Relationship satisfaction* was measured by the following question: “Taking things all together, how satisfied are you with your current relationship?” Response categories ranged from 1 (*very dissatisfied*) to 4 (*very satisfied*). We recognize that there may be qualitative differences between the desire to marry and the expectations concerning marriage. However, these terms have at times been used interchangeably or as proxies of each other in the literature (South, 1993). Because we were interested in understanding respondents’ assessments of the subjective expectation of marriage (rather than to predict a behavior such as marriage), we assessed respondents’ *expectations of marriage* with the question: “What do you think the likelihood is that you will ever get married/remarried?” Response categories ranged from 1 (*highly unlikely*) to 4 (*highly likely*). *Relationship longevity* was a continuous variable assessing the number of years respondents have been in a romantic relationship. The number of years in a romantic relationship ranged from 1 to 60 years. The frequency distribution of all the dependent variables used in this analysis is presented in Table 1.

Independent variables—*Relationship status* was measured by four categories—cohabiting/never married (referent), cohabiting/previously married, noncohabiting/previously married, and noncohabiting/never married. It is important to note that relationship status measures the respondents’ current status and that all of the categories are mutually exclusive. We also included two variables to assess *parental status*. We measure the parental status of the respondent by the following question: “How many children have you given birth to/fathered?” A dummy variable was created in order to compare those respondents with no children to those with children. The variable, partner has children from a previous relationship, was assessed by the following question: “Does your current partner have any children from other relationships?” Respondent’s partner has no children from a previous relationship was the referent and was compared to those respondents whose partner has children from a previous relationship.

Four measures of socioeconomic status were used: education (measured continuously), employment status—which assessed whether respondents were employed (referent), not working, or out of the labor force—income, and material hardship. Following other social science research, we have assumed that income has a log-normal distribution. Income was, therefore, transformed by taking the natural logarithm of income in order to achieve a normal distribution. Material hardship was a summary score consisting of seven items assessing whether or not respondents could meet basic expenses, pay full rent or mortgage, pay full utilities, had utilities disconnected, had telephone disconnected, were evicted for nonpayment of rent, and could not afford leisure activities in the past 12 months. A higher score on this item indicated greater material hardship. In addition, two variables of particular relevance to Black Caribbeans were also included—immigration status and country of origin. *Immigration status* has four categories: U.S. born (referent), and those Caribbean Blacks who resided in the United States from 0 to 10 years, 11 to 20 years, and more than 20

years. Black Caribbean respondents reported over 25 different countries of origin, which were recoded into five categories: Jamaica (referent), Spanish-speaking country (e.g., Dominican Republic, Cuba, Puerto Rico), Haiti, Trinidad and Tobago, and other English-speaking country (e.g., Barbados). Other demographic variables included in this analysis were ethnicity (0 = *African American*; 1 = *Caribbean Black*), gender (0 = *male*; 1 = *female*), region (0 = *South for African Americans*; 0 = *South, North Central, and West for Black Caribbeans*), and age (measured continuously). The present analysis was based on complete data for 1,362 African American and Black Caribbean respondents (18+ years) who were not currently married but indicated that they had a “main romantic” relationship for at least 1 year. The demographic characteristics of this sample are provided in Table 1.

Analytic Strategy

Linear regression analyses were conducted using SUDAAN 9.0. To obtain results that are generalizable to the African American and Black Caribbean population, all the analyses incorporated the sample’s race-adjusted weights. Weights in the NSAL data account for unequal probabilities of selection, nonresponse, and poststratification such that respondents are weighted in accordance with their numbers and proportions in the full population. In addition, all analyses accounted for the complex multistage clustered design of the NSAL sample (i.e., clustering and stratification) when computing standard errors.

Results

Relationship Satisfaction

Overall, respondents indicated that they were satisfied with their relationship, with about 46% of the entire sample indicating that they were very satisfied and only 11% indicating that they were dissatisfied. There was no significant difference in relationship satisfaction between African Americans and Black Caribbeans (analysis not shown). Among African Americans, those reporting material hardship were less satisfied with their relationship compared to their counterparts (Table 2, Model 1). Among Black Caribbeans (Table 2, Model 1), gender, education, material hardship, parental status, relationship status, and country of origin were significantly related to relationship satisfaction. Black Caribbean women and those with higher levels of education were more satisfied with their relationship than men and those with less education. Material hardship decreased relationship satisfaction. Those with children were less satisfied with their relationships compared to those who had no children. Never-married Black Caribbeans were less satisfied with their relationship than their counterparts who were cohabiting/never married. Black Caribbeans from other English-speaking countries had lower levels of relationship satisfaction than those from Jamaica.

Expectations of Marriage

Nearly 4 of 10 respondents (37.26%) reported that it is highly likely that they will ever marry; 27% believed it is unlikely that they would ever marry. There were no significant differences between African Americans and Caribbean Blacks on this measure (analysis not shown). Among African Americans, region, age, gender, and income were significantly associated with the expectations of marriage (Table 2, Model 2). Lower expectations were held by women, older respondents, those who resided in the West (compared to the South), and those with less income. Among Black Caribbeans, age, relationship status, and parental status were significantly associated with the expectations of marriage (Table 2, Model 2), with lower expectations expressed by those who were older, previously married, and those whose partners had no children from a previous relationship (compared to those with children from a previous relationship).

Relationship Longevity

The number of years in a romantic relationship varied from 1 to 60 years. The majority of the relationships were for a short duration, but more than one third of the relationships (35.76%) were for six or more years (Table 1). African Americans and Caribbean Blacks did not differ on this measure in regression analyses (not shown). To identify those relationship factors that are associated with longevity, we added the variables relationship satisfaction and expectations of marriage to the model.

Among African Americans, age, parental status, and relationship status were significantly associated with the number of years in a romantic relationship (Table 2, Model 3), with longer relationships observed among older African Americans, those with children, persons whose partner had no children from a previous relationship, and those who were cohabiting/never married (compared to those who were previously married). Among Black Caribbeans, age, education, parental status, relationship status, country of origin, and relationship satisfaction were significantly associated with the number of years in a romantic relationship (Table 2, Model 3). Older Black Caribbeans, those with children, and those with less education had longer relationships compared to their counterparts. Those who were previously married (not cohabiting) had shorter relationships than those who cohabit/never married, whereas those who were never married (not cohabiting) had longer relationships than those who cohabit/never married. Regarding country of origin, Black Caribbeans from Haiti had longer nonmarital relationships than those from Jamaica. Finally, relationship satisfaction was negatively associated with relationship longevity. Specifically, Black Caribbeans who were less satisfied with their relationships spent more years in a nonmarital romantic relationship compared to those who were more satisfied.

Discussion

The goal of this paper was to shed light on the nature of romantic unions among unmarried African Americans and Caribbean Blacks by identifying the correlates of relationship satisfaction, expectations of marriage, and relationship longevity. Overall, the findings indicated that there were no significant differences between African Americans and Black Caribbeans in these relationship outcomes. However, the pattern of relationships for the two groups differed. In the remainder of this section, we will discuss the findings for each of the dependent variables separately.

Relationship Satisfaction

The vast majority of respondents reported that they were either very or somewhat satisfied with their current romantic relationship. For both African Americans and Black Caribbeans, material hardship was associated with decreased levels of relationship satisfaction. This finding is consistent with previous research on African Americans indicating that financial strain (Cutrona et al., 2003) and lower incomes (Bryant & Wickrama, 2005) were associated with reduced levels of marital quality. The present findings, in combination with previous work on married samples, indicate that material hardship is detrimental to relationship satisfaction among both married and unmarried couples.

Among African Americans, gender was not significantly associated with relationship satisfaction, whereas among Black Caribbeans, women were more satisfied with their relationship compared to men. Both findings are inconsistent with prior research on marital satisfaction, which has found husbands to be more satisfied with their marriages than wives (e.g., Dillaway & Broman, 2001). The findings of the present analysis could be attributable to several factors. First, men are perceived to receive the majority of the benefits of marital relationships, such as reduced levels of household and childcare responsibilities. Nonmarital

unions, however, may be more egalitarian than marriages with respect to the division of household labor and child care. According to economic explanations of marital behavior, women in nonmarital unions may have more economic leverage and status and are, thus, able to negotiate more egalitarian arrangements. Second, it is important to consider the broader demographic and social contexts within which both marital and nonmarital unions occur. Given that the overall marriage rates of African Americans are low, many women may express higher levels of satisfaction with nonmarital romantic relationships because the alternative is not being in a relationship of any kind (Jayakody & Cabrera, 2002). In essence, the broader marriage market for African American women may function to “inflate” their reports of satisfaction with nonmarital relationships (rendering them indistinguishable from those of African American men).

Among Black Caribbeans, women indicated higher levels of satisfaction with their romantic relationship than men. Unfortunately, there is very little previous literature on marital relationships among Black Caribbeans, much less nonmarital unions. In an analysis of married Jamaican women who migrated to New York, Foner (2005) found that they were satisfied with their marital relationships. Her analysis suggests that this was because couples who migrated from Jamaica spent more time together in “couple” activities after they arrived in the United States. In addition, once in the United States, the household roles were more egalitarian. Other analyses of the NSAL data indicated that among married respondents, Black Caribbean women had higher rates of marital satisfaction than African American women. Collectively, these findings indicate that both married and unmarried Black Caribbean women have higher levels of relationship satisfaction than Black Caribbean men.

Caribbean Blacks with children were less satisfied with their relationships compared to those without children. The presence of children often increases the level of stress in a relationship and decreases relationship happiness among cohabitators (Brown, 2003). In particular, having children is associated with low levels of happiness in long cohabiting unions, perhaps because nearly most of these unions involve children from prior unions. In our study, 75% of respondents have children and more than 56% of their partners have children from a previous relationship. It is likely that levels of satisfaction are impacted by both the number of children between the couples and the responsibilities that parents have to their biological children and any involvement with the parent from their previous relationship.

Caribbean Blacks from Jamaica had higher levels of satisfaction with their relationships than those from other English-speaking countries (e.g., Barbados, Bahamas). This finding is consistent with the ethnographic work of Foner (2005) on the high levels of satisfaction among Jamaican couples. This finding along with other analysis of these data reveals that both married and unmarried Jamaicans note relatively higher levels of satisfaction with their relationships.

Expectations of Marriage

The majority of the respondents indicated that it was highly or somewhat likely that they would get married or remarried. This is consistent with previous research indicating that, despite low rates of marriage, the majority of African Americans have a strong belief in the importance of marriage (Harknett & McLanahan, 2004). Among both African Americans and Black Caribbeans, age was negatively associated with the expectations of marriage. This is consistent with the notion that older respondents, who have considerable experience in relationships, are content with their current situation and do not want to have the legal and social obligations of marriage. Conversely, younger adults likely view marriage as the next stage in the life course.

African American women had lower expectations of marriage than African American men. Consistent with economic explanations of marital behavior, the lower socioeconomic status of many African American men may make them less attractive as potential marriage partners but suitable for a romantic relationship. This finding contradicts research by South (1993) who found that African American men had a lower desire of marriage than African American women. This discrepancy is probably because of the major differences in study samples; South's sample was restricted to young (ages 19 – 35 years), unmarried noncohabiting African Americans, whereas this study includes all unmarried African American adults who are currently in a romantic relationship.

Among African Americans, those who reside in the South had higher expectations that their current relationship will lead to marriage than residents of the West. This could be because of the more traditional and more religious culture of the South (Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004), where marriage would be a more expected outcome of a romantic relationship.

African Americans with higher incomes had greater expectations of marrying than their lower socioeconomic status counterparts. This finding is consistent with research on the importance of economic stability as a precursor to marriage (Sweeney, 2002). This finding, in conjunction with the findings for relationship satisfaction among African Americans (Table 2), further demonstrates the importance of economic factors as a precursor to marriage among this group.

In comparison to Caribbean Black adults who are in cohabiting/never-married relationships, those who have been previously married had lower expectations of marriage. This finding is consistent with research and general observations that previously married adults are much more cautious about entering into another marital union.

Relationship Longevity

There was considerable heterogeneity in the number of years that respondents were in nonmarital unions, ranging from 1 to 60 years. For both African Americans and Caribbean Blacks, previously married (noncohabiting) respondents were in relationships that were of shorter duration than respondents who were cohabiting/never married. It is possible that respondents who have experienced marriage in the past may be less invested in long-term nonmarital relationships. Conversely, many enter cohabitation with the intent to marry. Thus, they are more likely to have invested heavily in the relationship (both materially and emotionally), which may help maintain their relationships longer (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993).

Our data show that African Americans and Caribbean Blacks with children spend more time in a nonmarital union compared to those with no children. This finding is consistent with studies examining the role of children in the transition to marriage and relationship stability. Wu (1995) found that cohabitating couples with children in the relationship are less likely to experience union disruption than couples without children. The financial responsibilities associated with raising children may be an impediment to marriage while at the same time encouraging a commitment to a nonmarital union.

In contrast, African Americans whose partner had children from a previous relationship had shorter relationships than those whose partner had no children from a previous relationship. Because we are unable to gauge whether the relationship was terminated or ended in marriage, we can only speculate as to the meaning of this finding. Research indicates that if a mother has a child by a previous relationship, it deters a visiting relationship but has no effect on the decision to cohabit or marry. However, a father's children from a previous relationship deter cohabitation and marriage with their current partner but have no effect on visiting (Carlson, McLanahan, & England, 2004). So, it is likely that the father's children

from a previous relationship may have some bearing on the termination of the relationship, which would explain our finding of shorter relationships for those African Americans whose partner had children from a previous relationship. Future research should explore whether having children compromises a man's future marital and nonmarital relationships because of child support obligations, his likely disinclination to commit to one woman, or because other women are wary of his potential continued romantic involvement with the mother of his children.

Among Caribbean Blacks only, fewer years of education was associated with more years in a romantic relationship. Additionally, never-married respondents reported more years in their relationship, whereas previously married respondents reported fewer years in their relationship (compared to cohabiting/never-married Caribbean Blacks). The finding for education is consistent with socioeconomic explanations of marital behavior among Caribbean Blacks. Studies examining the impact of educational attainment and income on the decision to marry indicate that marriage is more likely to occur among those with greater economic stability and higher social ranking (Goode, 1960).

Caribbean Blacks who were less satisfied with their relationship maintained their romantic relationships longer than those who were more satisfied. This finding is consistent with studies of relationship quality among cohabiting couples. Findings from these studies indicate that duration of a relationship has a negative impact on relationship happiness (Brown, 2003).

Interpretation of these findings should be considered within the context of the study's strengths and limitations. First, the Black Caribbean sample excluded individuals who did not speak English; therefore, the study findings are not generalizable beyond this group. Another limitation involves the use of single items to measure our dependent variables. Although there are occasions when a single item is insufficient for representing a particular construct (e.g., personality), they are suitable for narrow or otherwise unambiguous constructs (Sackett & Larson, 1990). In the current analysis, the dependent variables are unambiguous constructs that are sufficiently narrow and easily understood by respondents. Our results indicate that the measured items have face validity and function within the model as would be theoretically expected. Finally, because these data are cross-sectional, it is impossible to determine whether those respondents in a shorter term relationship will end up in a longer term relationship in the future. Admittedly, this is one of the limitations associated with using cross-sectional data. Future studies using longitudinal data are necessary to make this distinction. Despite these limitations, this study provides some unique insights into nonmarital romantic relationships among African Americans and Black Caribbeans.

Implications for Practice, Policy, and Research

The increasing prevalence of nonmarital romantic relationships in the United States poses a challenge for policymakers regarding how to promote marriage while simultaneously protecting the rights of individuals who are in unions with no intent to marry. Given the current trend, various governmental and institutional entities in the United States may eventually have to consider and debate the merits of providing unmarried relationships and families' social and legal standing comparable to that currently accorded to those who are married. Many Latin American countries have long histories of socially accepted consensual unions, which may substitute for formal unions in some groups (De Vos, 1999). Laws about taxes, housing, and child support treat unmarried and married couples the same in Sweden, where premarital cohabitation is practically universal (Hoem, 1995). Countries like Canada, France, and Sweden have already changed their legal codes so that references to "spouse" also pertain to unmarried partners and so that partners who meet certain criteria can gain

“marital” rights as domestic partners. Other countries like Australia, Mexico, South Africa, and the U.K. have either taken initial steps toward broader recognition or are currently engaged in national debates about how to best reconcile the gap between current existing family configurations and those defined in legal terms. In contrast, family law in the United States does not give the rights of married couples to those who are unmarried, despite the increasing numbers of romantic unions that do not end in marriage.

Some of the problematic issues about providing the same legal rights to unmarried couples and their families as married individuals are distinguishing between (a) those who would prefer marriage, but their economic circumstances prevent them from marrying; (b) those who seek a different type of relationship, that is, an alternative to marriage; and (c) those who are using their relationship as a trial period during which they assess whether marriage is the desirable outcome. Another problematic issue is the potential for fraud. Married couples can prove their legal status with a marriage license, but it is much more difficult to prove that an unmarried couple is in a committed relationship. Various forms of documentation can be used, either separately or in combination, to prove long-term commitment including, for example, residing together for seven or more years, being beneficiaries of insurance policies, being a beneficiary on each others will, or being legal co-owners of a place of residence. The heterogeneity of nonmarital romantic relationships as illustrated by our findings, coupled with the substantial variation across states in the availability of domestic partner registration, the eligibility rules, and the benefits and responsibilities of registration demonstrate public disagreement about the meaning of cohabiting and noncohabiting romantic relationships and their place in the U.S. family system. The increase in nonmarital romantic relationships among African Americans and Americans in general, over the past few decades, suggests that these relationships may become more formalized institutions in the future, but it is unlikely that they will have the preferential standing of marriage.

Evidence does suggest that unmarried couples and families can benefit from the same or similar services as married couples and families. A recent study indicates that unmarried couples may also benefit from relationship education (Carlson & McLanahan, 2006). Specifically, findings indicate that higher levels of supportiveness in the couples’ relationship (e.g., affection, encouragement) and lower levels of conflict (e.g., criticism, arguments) resulted in more positive parenting behaviors. These findings suggest that interventions should focus on both increasing supportive exchanges and reducing negative interactions between couples. This observation is underscored by studies of negative interactions among Black Americans (Lincoln, Chatters, & Taylor, 2003; Lincoln, Taylor, & Chatters, 2003).

Rarely do researchers acknowledge that unmarried adults in romantic relationships may not perceive themselves as part of the marriage process. The major finding from this investigation is the observed diversity in the longevity and relationship characteristics of nonmarital unions. With lower rates of marriage overall, we will likely see more variety in relationship types and the sequencing process. Socioeconomic status was an especially strong predictor of relationship quality and stability for Caribbean Blacks. Those with more education are more satisfied and have longer relationships than their counterparts. Similarly, those Caribbean Blacks with more income have higher expectations of marriage. These findings support those of other studies reporting an association between economic factors and marital quality and stability. Overall, our findings are largely consistent with findings from studies of married couples (e.g., Cutrona et al., 2003). That is, our findings suggest that the correlates of relationship satisfaction, expectations of marriage, and relationship longevity for African Americans and Black Caribbeans in nonmarital relationships may not be markedly different from those factors that predict quality and stability for married

couples. There was one important distinction, however. Neither African American nor Black Caribbean men displayed the greater relationship satisfaction levels generally observed in marital research.

Overall, the findings of this study are consistent with other work in affirming that the traditional notion of short-term courtships, followed by a long-term marriage, is no longer normative for a significant number of Americans. Lower rates of marriage and remarriage invariably increase the length of time in adulthood spent unmarried. Consequently, it is imperative that family researchers expand their research to include the entire spectrum of long-term relationships—including marriage, cohabitation, and involvements among those who do not reside in the same household.

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Table 1

Characteristics of the Sample ($N = 1,358$)^a

Variable	African American ($N = 951$)		Caribbean Black ($N = 407$)	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Gender				
Male	304	40.04	158	49.35
Female	647	59.27	249	50.65
Age ** (years)				
18 – 24	188	23.52	108	30.07
25 – 34	269	27.25	137	35.53
35 – 44	231	23.14	80	19.35
45 – 54	163	17.00	59	9.95
55 – 64	63	5.63	14	3.31
65 – 74	28	2.67	6	0.48
75+	9	0.79	3	1.31
Household income *				
Less than \$9,999	195	17.97	42	8.45
\$10,000 – \$19,999	244	21.44	74	20.64
\$20,000 – \$29,999	168	17.67	76	16.89
\$30,000 – \$59,999	258	29.73	140	30.88
\$60,000+	86	13.18	75	23.14
Relationship status ***				
Cohabiting/never married	166	21.19	97	31.39
Cohabiting/previously married	93	11.93	33	10.64
Previously married	271	23.62	87	14.54
Never married	421	43.26	190	43.44
Country of origin ^b				
Spanish Caribbean	—	—	46	14.62
Haiti	—	—	67	13.43
Jamaica	—	—	129	29.88
Trinidad and Tobago	—	—	48	8.43
Other English	—	—	111	33.64
Years in relationship *				
1	162	19.48	80	20.74
2	151	15.81	65	20.61
3	127	13.23	61	9.32
4 – 5	145	15.59	71	15.28
6 – 9	150	15.90	65	18.41
10 – 19	144	16.02	36	9.10
20+	43	3.97	12	6.54
Relationship satisfaction				

Variable	African American (N = 951)		Caribbean Black (N = 407)	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Very satisfied	421	46.60	159	38.32
Somewhat satisfied	414	42.60	194	46.13
Somewhat dissatisfied	91	8.91	42	10.82
Very dissatisfied	24	1.89	11	4.73
Education ** (years)				
0 – 8	45	4.57	12	6.00
9 – 11	211	21.84	54	13.52
12	372	39.78	132	31.06
13 – 15	218	22.69	122	29.95
16	64	7.22	52	8.56
17+	41	3.90	35	10.92
Material hardship				
None	539	57.50	251	61.18
1	142	14.32	61	10.66
2	105	11.46	30	13.38
3 – 4	124	12.72	46	8.52
5 – 7	41	4.00	19	6.25
Work status				
Working	681	71.37	313	74.16
Not working	120	12.59	47	10.49
Out of the labor force	150	16.04	47	15.35
Region ***				
Northeast	124	18.24	301	59.60
Midwest	173	20.81	7	9.67
South	576	50.22	96	23.76
West	78	10.73	3	6.97
Immigration status ^c				
U.S. born	951	100.00	1,076	94.05
0 – 10 years	—	—	83	2.60
11 – 20 years	—	—	86	1.35
21+ years	—	—	98	2.00
Parental status/partner				
Children	804	56.36	804	56.36
No children	554	43.64	554	43.64
Parental status/respondent				
Children	753	75.39	282	67.05
No children	198	24.61	125	32.95
Expectations of marriage ***				
Highly likely	322	36.83	146	42.82
Somewhat likely	331	35.67	173	36.92

Variable	African American (<i>N</i> = 951)		Caribbean Black (<i>N</i> = 407)	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Somewhat unlikely	111	10.77	39	9.77
Highly unlikely	184	16.73	47	10.50

Note. Significant differences between African Americans and Caribbean Blacks:

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

^aWeighted percentages.

^bCaribbean-specific variable.

^cAll African Americans are U.S. born.

Table 2
Standardized Regression Estimates of the Effects of Covariates on Relationship Variables: African Americans and Caribbean Blacks

Variable	Relationship Satisfaction (Model 1)			Expectations of Marriage (Model 2)			Years in Relationship (Model 3)						
	African Americans (N = 932)			African Americans (N = 930)			African Americans (N = 931)						
	B	SE		B	SE		B	SE					
Region													
Northeast	-0.05	0.03	-0.07	0.06	0.03	-0.03	0.03	-0.07	0.07	0.48	0.27	0.41	0.40
North Central	-0.06	0.04	—	—	0.05	0.05	—	—	—	0.21	0.33	—	—
West	0.01	0.03	—	—	-0.07*	0.03	—	—	—	-0.15	0.23	—	—
Age	-0.03	0.03	0.08	0.06	-0.37***	0.04	-0.20*	0.08	0.08	2.27***	0.30	2.90***	0.29
Gender													
Female	-0.04	0.03	0.11**	0.04	-0.13***	0.04	-0.06	0.05	0.05	0.32	0.25	0.35	0.36
Education	-0.04	0.04	0.05*	0.02	0.06	0.04	0.01	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.28	-0.41**	0.14
Material hardship	-0.14***	0.04	-0.14***	0.03	0.00	0.04	-0.03	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.26	0.20	0.13
Respondent has children	-0.04	0.03	-0.15***	0.04	0.07	0.04	-0.07	0.06	0.06	0.58*	0.24	0.47*	0.17
Partner has children	0.02	0.02	0.01	0.06	-0.02	0.04	0.12*	0.05	0.05	-0.46**	0.17	-0.26	0.27
Relationship status													
Cohabiting/previously married	0.01	0.03	-0.11	0.06	0.06	0.05	-0.10	0.06	0.06	-0.10	0.29	0.20	0.16
Previously married	-0.04	0.04	-0.05	0.03	-0.07	0.05	-0.11**	0.04	0.04	-0.94**	0.32	-0.44*	0.16
Never married	-0.06	0.03	-0.14***	0.03	-0.01	0.04	-0.05	0.05	0.05	0.17	0.26	0.61**	0.23
Employment status													
Unemployed	0.05	0.03	-0.02	0.04	-0.05	0.05	-0.06	0.04	0.04	0.08	0.21	-0.02	0.09
Out of labor force	0.03	0.03	0.00	0.03	-0.05	0.04	0.10	0.06	0.06	0.03	0.17	0.67	0.45
Income	-0.00	0.04	-0.04	0.05	0.12*	0.06	0.01	0.06	0.06	-0.06	0.29	-0.28	0.15
Country of origin													
Spanish Caribbean	—	—	-0.02	0.02	—	—	-0.03	0.03	0.03	—	—	-0.17	0.21
Haiti	—	—	0.07	0.04	—	—	-0.04	0.07	0.07	—	—	0.49*	0.19
Trinidad and Tobago	—	—	-0.02	0.02	—	—	-0.01	0.03	0.03	—	—	-0.02	0.11
Other English	—	—	-0.07*	0.03	—	—	-0.06	0.07	0.07	—	—	-0.32	0.29

