Published in final edited form as:

Sex Roles. 2018 August ; 79(3-4): 151–162. doi:10.1007/s11199-017-0870-8.

Circumstances Beyond Their Control: Black Women's Perceptions of Black Manhood

Jasmine A. Abrams, PhD,

University of Maryland, Baltimore County, Department of Psychology, 1000 Hilltop Road, Baltimore, MD 21250

Morgan L. Maxwell, PhD, and

Virginia Commonwealth University, School of Medicine, Department of Health Behavior and Policy, 830 East Main Street, Richmond, VA 23219, iCubed: Institute Inclusion, Inquiry, and Innovation

Faye Z. Belgrave, PhD

Virginia Commonwealth University, Psychology Department, Box 842018, Richmond, Virginia 23284-2018

Abstract

Insufficient empirical attention has been paid to Black women's perceptions of Black male gender roles and associated masculinity. Although constructions of Black masculinity have been speculated about in popular media and literature, no known published studies have specifically investigated Black women's perceptions of Black men or offered a conceptualization of Black masculinity informed by their voices. Because women's perceptions of and beliefs about men affect partnership decisions, quality of relationships, childrearing decisions, health behaviors, and other aspects of personal and psychosocial well-being, the purpose of the present exploratory qualitative study was to fill the noted gap in the literature while highlighting context related to these beliefs. Participants in eight focus groups were 44 Black women, ranging in age from 18 to 91, from the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Transcribed focus group data were coded via a qualitative data analysis software program. Thematic analysis of data revealed three main themes: (a) Strong Armed and Strong Minded, (b2) Challenges with Familial and Personal Connections, and (c) Circumstances Beyond Their Control: Impact of the Black Experience. Implications for research and practice related to Black marriage, family, and parenting relationships are discussed.

Keywords

African American women; gender schema; psychology of women; sex roles; culture

"…Gender ideology not only creates ideas about femininity but it also shapes conceptions of masculinity… For Blacks, the relationship between race and gender

Correspondence concerning this manuscript should be addressed to Jasmine Abrams, University of Maryland, Baltimore County, Department of Psychology, 1000 Hilltop Road, Baltimore, MD 21250, jaabrams@umbc.edu, Phone: (410) 455- 0156.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

> is intensified, producing a Black gender ideology that shapes ideas about Black masculinity…" (Collins, 2004, p. 6)

Black women and men in the United States share a complex and painful history of racial exclusion, discrimination, injustice, and economic hardship (Collins, 2004). These socio-historical factors have not only influenced quality of life and socioeconomic standing (Aldridge, 1991), but also directly influenced development of racialized gendered perceptions and roles of Black women and men (Belgrave & Allison, 2013). The life experiences of Black women and men can be uniquely and partially contoured by gender role beliefs (Collins, 2004). Although extant literature describes Black men's gender role beliefs (Adams, 2007; Bowleg et al., 2011; Chaney, 2009; Diemer, 2002; Ford, 2011) and Black women's gender role beliefs for women (Abrams, Javier, Maxwell, Belgrave, & Nguyen, 2016), the scholarship in this area is fragmented and incomplete because there are no known published studies that provide an in-depth analysis of Black women's gender role views for Black men. By investigating such perceptions through qualitative inquiry, the present study fills a gap in the literature that has neglected the voices of women who most often partner with Black men and who are most responsible for rearing and socializing Black boys into men.

Such information has timely research and clinical implications because women's perceptions of men can influence partnership decisions, quality of relationships, health behaviors, and other aspects of personal and psychosocial well-being (Erchull, Liss, Axelson, Staebell, & Askari, 2010; Vohs & Finkel, 2006). Additionally, by analyzing the perspectives of Black women, the current study better contextualizes the overarching Black gender ideologies that encompass racialized gendered perceptions, expectations, and behaviors. As such, the information presented herein stands to diversify and augment extant gender role research that has largely collapsed the experiences and perceptions of men into a single hegemonic version, one largely representative of White middle-class men.

The Making of Gender Role Beliefs

Gender role beliefs reflect expectations associated with various roles of men and women. Gender schemas are mental systems of associations that categorize and guide gendered beliefs, expectations, and behaviors. According to gender schema theory, gender meanings are constructed and maintained through cognitive organization and interpretation (Bem, 1981, 1993). Acquired from cultural sharing groups, gender schemas and related beliefs interact to produce gendered perceptions of men and women (Levy & Fivush, 1993). By way of observational learning and parental teachings, gender role beliefs and schemas can be transmitted generationally (Sharp & Ispa, 2009; Tenebaum & Leaper, 2002). They provide culturally specific behavioral guidelines for responding and adapting to mental and environmental stimuli (Levy & Fivush, 1993).

Social role theory also helps us to understand that gender role beliefs are complex and can be influenced by social situations and environmental factors (Eagly, 1997). This theory is built on the premise that men and women behave differently based on societal expectations. These expectations and their associated behavioral differences emerge in the home, the

workforce, and other social situations. Because individuals modify their behavior to cohere with culturally specific gender norms and expectations, understanding Black women's gendered perceptions of Black men lends itself to better understanding the romantic, platonic, and parenting relationships they build with Black men.

The Black gender ideologies to which Black women subscribe and the systems that inform them can indirectly and directly shape the behaviors of Black men (Collins, 2004). Using gender schemas, Black women filter their micro, meso, and macro environments for gender-associated information. This information is then used to define Black manhood and guides relational engagement. Thus, how Black women perceive and engage Black men is a byproduct of the interaction between shared environmental conditions and culturally specific gendered perceptions. These psycho-environmental interactions ultimately impinge upon perceptions of Black men and associated behavior, which has implications for relationship dynamics and parenting practices (Belgrave & Allison, 2013).

Black Women's Perceptions of Black Men

Discussions of U.S. Black women's views of Black men, especially regarding marriage, have largely taken place within popular literature (Flores, 2014; Reid, 2014). Notwithstanding, limited scientific research regarding Black gender ideologies of Black women exists. Whereas popular literature generally describes the state of Black relationships as disheartened, of poor quality, and conflict-ridden (Reid, 2014), empirical research has mostly devoted attention to low Black marriage rates (Banks & Gatlin, 2005; Bennett, Bloom, & Craig, 1989; Cherlin, 1998). To date, no known scientific studies have qualitatively examined Black gender ideologies of Black women as they relate to Black men. Are they as antagonistic as assumed? Or are Black women's perceptions of Black men more balanced, in that both strengths and challenges are recognized?

Of the minimal studies that highlight Black relationships and Black gender ideologies of Black women, most focus on gendered power. According to Cowdery and colleagues (2009), because Black men experience a lack of respect in society and low societal power, Black women attempt to buffer these negative experiences by accepting more traditional gender roles in the home. For example, a woman in Cowdery and colleagues' (2009, p. 32) study stated that she allows her husband to exert more power in their relationship "cause no man, no Black man wants a wife, a woman, who knows more than he does.'' Researchers have also found that some Black women modify their straightforward personality types and minimize their successes to make men feel more comfortable and confident (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003).

Studies on Black women's views have also revealed feelings of uncertainty about the dependability of Black men (Cowdery et al., 2009). Chambers and Kravitz (2011) suggest that trust is a crucial variable in promoting positive relationships, noting that Blacks may be less trusting because of oppressive historical experiences with enslavement and medical genocide. Relatedly, a longitudinal study of race-related stress events experienced by Blacks during late childhood and early adolescence were found to give rise to cynical and distrusting relationship schemas among Black couples. These negative relationship schemas

increased difficulties in romantic relationships during late adolescence and emerging adulthood (Simons, Simons, Lei, & Landor, 2012). Such studies highlight the key role of shared socio-historical experiences in shaping Black gender roles and beliefs.

Despite the few studies that have been conducted on psychological and behavioral outcomes related to Black relationships and interactions, limited studies have focused explicitly on identifying the underlying perceptions that may influence such outcomes, an omission in the literature that the current study addresses. Further, women's constructions of masculinity and perceptions of men are needed to better understand the socialization of Black boys, which further underscores the importance of the current study.

Implications for Sons of Black Women

> I gave my seven-year-old son a talk about Ferguson. I was brutally honest… I told him that the police put a target on Black men on this country. I told him I am angry because I don't want him dead or in jail one day for a crime he either didn't commit, or because … a police officer sees he fits "the profile." (Hughes, 2014)

Recently, the media's highlighting of the overrepresentation of unarmed Black men in police shooting deaths has prompted both researchers (Chaney & Robertson, 2013; Patterson & Swan, 2016) and popular media to re-evaluate and unpack societal perceptions and cultural expectations of Black men. Better understanding the cultural stereotypes and perceptions that put them at risk could reduce implicit and explicit biases. One way to advance this inquiry is to gather the perspectives of the parents of Black men. Parents' gender roles beliefs and norms directly influence how children develop and adhere to their own gender norms and expectations (Peck, Brodish, Malanchuk, Banerjee, & Eccles, 2014; Varner & Mandara, 2014; Witt, 1997). Given that many U.S. Black men were once boys born to and raised by a single Black mother (Martin, Hamilton, Osterman, Driscoll, & Mathews, 2015), Black women's perceptions of Black men bear significantly on how Black men formulate their own Black gender ideology. Additionally, their viewpoints can directly influence the transmission of racialized gender role beliefs and inform the socialization process (Sharp & Ispa, 2009; Tenebaum & Leaper, 2002).

Current Study

Although constructions of Black masculinity have been speculated about in popular media and literature, few have specifically investigated Black women's perceptions of Black men or offered a conceptualization of Black masculinity informed by their voices. Further, no studies, to our knowledge, have investigated the contextual factors that shape the perspectives of Black women. Because gender role beliefs are influential to relationship dynamics, child-rearing practices, and other behaviors, it our goal to explore and better contextualize Black women's perceptions of Black masculinity through qualitative inquiry.

Method

Participants

Participants were 44 Black women, ranging in age from 18 to 91 (M = 44.23, SD = 19.63), from the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Seventy percent (n = 31) of participants were community members and 30% (n = 13) were college students. Two groups of women (ns = 8, 8) were recruited from a community agency that provides various services to low-income Blacks. Two groups of women (ns = 3, 3) were recruited via a liaison in the Muslim community. Another two groups (ns = 4, 5) were recruited from the Psychology Department's undergraduate research participation pool. A faith-based women's group for senior citizens was utilized to recruit a group of elder Black women (n = 6). Another group (n = 7) was recruited from an urban metropolitan area via flyers and word of mouth.

Most of the women (88%; n = 39), reported having at least a high school diploma or equivalent, 32% (n = 14) obtained some college, 11% (n = 5) earned an associate's degree, 16% (n = 7) earned a bachelor's degree, and 11% (n = 5) attended graduate or professional school. A majority of the women (55%; n = 24) were employed, either full-time (n = 10) or part-time (n =14), and most were mothers (63%; n = 28). Forty-five percent (n = 20) of participants were single and never married, 18% (n = 8) were married, and 20% (n = 9) were divorced.

Procedure

Purposive, convenience, and referral sampling strategies were employed. Recruitment sites included community organizations that provide services for Black women, a faith based women's group from a Black church, and the undergraduate research participation pool at a large urban university. Women were notified of the study through word-of-mouth and posted flyers. Eligibility requirements included the following: be at least 18 years of age and identify as an African American or Black woman.

We deemed focus groups, versus individual interviews, to be the most appropriate method of inquiry given the purpose of a larger study. Two interviewers conducted a total of eight focus groups. Focus groups were convened with women who were roughly in same age groups (e.g., emerging adults, young and middle-age adults, and senior citizens), a strategy used to group individuals with comparable life experiences (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999). A middle-aged Black woman conducted all of the focus groups with community members, and a Black female graduate research assistant facilitated the focus groups with college students. Two ethnic minority female graduate students served as observers, attending each session and drafting comprehensive field notes. Group sessions took place in private rooms at the site from which participants were recruited or at a local university, depending on which location was more convenient for participants.

After discussing confidentiality and the purpose of the study, researchers obtained permission to record the session. Participants then completed informed consent documents and demographic data forms. Next, women were asked to identify themselves each time they spoke (using their choice of only their first name, initials, or a pseudonym) to ensure accurate identification of participants when audio recording responses. Focus groups ranged

in size from three to eight participants and lasted between 30 minutes and 1.25 hours. Discussions were audio recorded and later transcribed by trained research assistants.

Focus group discussions were guided by several questions designed to engage women in discussion about Black women and men. These questions were written for a larger study, which sought to identify gender role beliefs of Black women. The current study analyzed data generated from the following questions: “When you think of men, what comes to mind?”; “What do you think (if anything) makes Black men different from men in other racial/ethnic groups?”; “In your opinion, what would an ideal Black man be like?”; and “How would you define ‘masculine’?”

Focus group facilitators urged all women to participate and utilized clarification (i.e., paraphrasing responses, asking clarifying questions, and encouraging elaboration on unclear comments) to better comprehend participants’ beliefs and opinions (O’Connor, 2001). Participants’ responses were not equal in number. However, all women made at least one contribution to focus group discussions. At the end of each focus group discussion, the interviewer asked women if they had additional questions or comments. Women were thanked for their participation and provided incentives at the conclusion of their session. Community women were provided an incentive of $20.00, and college students were provided with extra course credit. A university Institutional Review Board approved methods for the current study, which was part of a larger study wherein the goal was to develop a measure of gender role beliefs for Black women.

Data Analyses

After transcription of focus group data, five research team members (four Black women and one Asian American woman) reviewed all transcripts scrupulously and established a preliminary coding scheme based on patterns identified in the data. Subsequently, three Black men also reviewed the transcripts and provided suggestions for the revision of the preliminary coding scheme.

Using guidelines offered by Braun and Clarke (2006), two trained researchers conducted thematic analyses using data gathered from the eight focus groups. Transcribed data were coded via a qualitative data analysis software program, NVivo 8. After the initial coding phase, the researchers merged similar codes, resolved coding discrepancies, and established inter-coder reliability at an agreement of 96%. Next, researchers identified prevalent codes, operationalized as codes mentioned in at least four of the eight groups and across groups at least 10 times. A total of 19 prevalent codes emerged from the eight verbatim focus group transcripts. Prevalent codes were then grouped by similarity and relevance into three themes. Data analysis was cyclical and involved continuous development of new codes and constant comparison of themes. Such emergent strategies are vital for capturing the beliefs, experiences, and voices of participants (Creswell, 2017; O’Connor, 2001).

Scientific Rigor

Numerous techniques were utilized to strengthen scientific rigor in our qualitative study. For example, the use of open-ended questions helps to promote authenticity of the data (Seale & Silverman, 1997). In addition, clarification was utilized to help ensure a better understanding

of participants' views (O'Connor, 2001). Further, in order to strengthen scientific rigor, the researchers employed an emergent research design, iterative processes with multiple coders, peer examination, and inductive data analysis with Nvivo 8, a qualitative software package, (O'Connor, 2001). Lastly, the presentation of the final research product contains a thick description of the data, including extensive quotations, that reflects context (O'Connor, 2001).

Results

Prevalent codes were grouped by similarity and likeness, which resulted in three main themes: (a) Strong Armed and Strong Minded, (b) Challenges with Familial and Personal Connections and (c) Circumstances Beyond Their Control: Impact of the Black Experience. Themes, prevalent codes used to inform development of each theme, example quotes, and the frequency of each theme are reported in Table 1.

Strong Armed and Strong Minded

Across groups, men generally and Black men specifically, were consistently viewed as strong, as discussed in seven of the eight groups by 27 (61%) women. This strength was described in two ways: physical strength and mental strength. Men were thought to possess physical strength and were described as hardworking, "…strong, … fighter[s], and powerful" (19-year-old single woman). "I would think of strength when referring to men… I could associate power with that" (50-year-old divorced mother). Women also associated men with masculinity and large muscles. A 20-year-old single woman commented, "[When] I think of masculine, I think of muscles… going to the gym I will see … guys [who are] like really big and think 'wow, he's masculine.'"

In addition, to physical strength, women described a possession of "mental strength" among Black men. An 80-year-old widowed mother shared her thoughts:

> When I think of masculine I think of male first and then the strength. The strength of what I'm speaking about is not physical strength… [Its being able to] stand up when it's time to stand up be a man … don't be wishie washie … have a voice, stand up, say what you mean and mean what you say.

This strength was described as mental toughness in which men displayed an ability to be resolute, assertive, and determined. Differentiating Black men from other men in this regard, numerous women attested to Black men possessing such strength. "Black men, some of them are very strong minded and strong willed…" (26-year-old cohabitating woman). Participants also shared thoughts of their fathers, grandfathers, and men in general being "hardworking" and "firm" disciplinarians as ways of displaying strength.

Furthermore, women described men in leadership roles as displaying this form of intangible strength. Men were considered to be goal-oriented leaders, heads of households and families, and providers. An older woman shared her thoughts: "When I think of men I think of strength and leadership, providers" (80-year-old widowed mother). Mental toughness was also mentioned as a unique characteristic of Black men in their role as leaders of families. Hinting at displays of resilience in the face of social challenges experienced by Black men in

the workforce, a 63-year-old married mother shared that “Black men in the past and even now have worked a lot harder to, you know, look out for their families and make an earning and see that … that their families are taken care of…”

Other women shared views of Black men as leaders and providers, although these views were often expressed as visions of an ideal Black man. “[An] ideal Black man should be, first of all, like the Bible says—the head of a relationship, the head of the house, [and] the head of themselves” (56-year-old divorced mother). Women also related images of ideal Black men to men in their lives such as their fathers and or grandfathers.

Challenges with Familial and Personal Connections

The theme of Challenges with Familial and Personal Connections was captured by 20 (43%) women across six groups. Many discussions transpired about challenges experienced related to men’s connections with their romantic partners and families. A 50-year-old single woman explained that some Black men have difficulties with “… the sense of commitment to family… not every Black man but some still have that.” A 54-year-old divorced woman noted, “…you don’t find many Black men wanting to commit, or knowing how to commit or committing through to the end.”

Several participants noted that many Black men might not know *how* to commit due to sociocultural factors such as the absence of fathers or father figures—a circumstance women believed perpetuated a cycle of reduced commitment to women and families. An older woman captured the voices of several women with her comments:

> I think a lot of it is environmental to me…I would think that depending on where or how someone was reared would have a lot to do with their behavior. So …it’s true that all men don’t commit as much as … we would like them to. (75-year-old widowed mother)

Citing socialization as a possible culprit, this woman explained that men may have difficulty with connecting to families and partners because they did not learn how to or have examples for doing so. Other participants highlighted that these types of challenges contributed to a lack of trust in men and subsequently contributed to their perceived obligation to assume roles as independent women.

Some women believed connectivity challenges with personal and familial relationships were related to men being reluctant to connect emotionally, which was described as being unemotional or emotionally inexpressive. A 19-year-old single woman shared that men “… are afraid of emotions.” Another woman in the same group commented: “I agree with her… men do … front like they don’t have any emotions…” (22-year-old single woman). Providing a rationale for this type of behavior, a 54-year-old divorced mother stated that men “are taught to not address emotions.” Although participants were aware that men are socialized to avoid emotional displays, they seemed disappointed when discussing their lack of emotional expression.

Participants expressed thoughts about the need for men to be more sensitive to their emotions as well as the emotions of others. “They need to like really think about how they

are saying the things they say to people…They need to be… in touch with people's emotions more" (19-year-old single woman). Despite perceptions of commitment challenges among men, women associated manhood with being able to "… take care of families [and] be … leaders…" (63-year-old married mother).

Circumstances Beyond Their Control: Impact of the Black Experience

When describing their perceptions of Black men, 29 (66%) participants across each of the eight groups contextualized their responses with vivid accounts of personal and socio-historical circumstances unique to the Black American experience. Specifically, women believed these experiences created a unique type of social disadvantage experienced by Black men.

> Our men…get criticized too much and sometimes by the women …it's not their fault… A lot of our men are locked up… [and] have circumstances beyond their control that they were born into … and they don't have … the necessary tools … to get more. They want to get good paying jobs and a lot of our men can't…They didn't have the resources in order to get a better chance … A lot of them don't have two-parent families … and they don't know who their fathers are, or the fathers are not you know being responsible because it's a generational thing.… He needs a man in his life to really teach him how to be a man… our men for so long, haven't had…had strong men in their lives, it has just been passed down from the generations to generations… (40-year-old divorced mother)

This woman echoed and coalesced the responses of many women, highlighting individual, cultural, and structural factors that contribute to the social disadvantage experienced by Black men. In the eyes of participants, Black men desire to accomplish goals for personal success as well as support and provide for their families. However, limited resources, prejudices, discriminatory practices, incarceration, disadvantages stemming from childhood, internalized stereotypes, and/or a combination of these barriers prevent them from doing so.

Women also described how these factors influence gendered interactions between Black men and women. A 50-year-old single woman explained:

> Black men are somewhat different …I don't think they have the sense of commitment to family. Because of… the history… being separated and sold from your family and never probably meeting up with them again.

Further contextualizing gendered interactions between Black men and women, participants explained that pain and fractured identities resulting from historical experiences with enslavement also played an important role. Another 50-year-old single woman shared:

> … we had to endure being separated from our families, children taken from us, raped, beaten… our identity was stolen. We… didn't have the opportunity to go to formal schools… and almost you were beaten to death if you were caught reading or trying to educate yourself. So we endured a lot of pain.

Echoing similar sentiments, another woman commented:

> … I think we did endure a lot of pain and with that also comes … some loss of identity as to … who we are and … that presents in itself a whole slew of other problems that we are still dealing with today. (49-year-old married mother)

Women emphasized agonizing physical and psychological sociohistorical experiences that planted seeds of disadvantage for Black people. According to participants, these experiences stripped Blacks of their African identity and customs, forced them to adopt foreign traditions, and left Blacks struggling with the ramifications of familial separation and identity castration for generations to come. Explaining how these painful socio-historical experiences connect to present day realities, a participant shared:

> … the history that goes behind the relationships… with Black men and women was so painful …That pain permeates to this day in our relationships between each other, between our children, in everything that we do that pain is still there for us… the pain that the family was broken… (59-year-old married mother)

In addition to underscoring structural barriers that influence gendered interactions between Black men and women, participants highlighted psychological barriers that seemed to stem from cultural memories of adversity, pain, and a sense of culturally shared unresolved grief. Women believed the indelible scars that were left on the psyche of Blacks were responsible for the absence of Black men in families and consequent societal expectations for Black women to be breadwinning matriarchs.

Discussion

The goal of the current study was to better understand U.S. Black women's gender role beliefs for and perceptions of Black men. Results revealed perceptions of Black men to be captured by three themes: (a) Strong Armed and Strong Minded, (b) Challenges with Familial and Personal Connections, and (c) Circumstances Beyond Their Control: Impact of the Black Experience. Contextual factors or "circumstances beyond their control" that contributed to the development, shaping, and maintenance of perceptions of Black men were mostly related to painful historical experiences and perceptions of social disadvantage among Black men. Participants spoke passionately about how oppression and marginalization influenced gender roles of, and interactions between, Black men and Black women.

Despite prior assumptions that Black women view Black men unfavorably, our findings suggest a more balanced and contextualized assessment. Similar to previous research (Mincey, Alfonso, Hackney, & Luque, 2015), a theme that emerged across all focus groups was that Black men were both physically and mentally strong. To participants, this strength was evidenced through working hard and providing for their families. Consistent with previous literature, physical strength was associated with being masculine, a traditional gender role of men (Bem, 1974). Mental strength was described as being assertive, powerful, hardworking, firm, and strong-willed. There was also evidence that men were viewed as goal-oriented leaders, heads of households, and providers, consistent with traditional gender role beliefs (Bem, 1974). The perception of Black men as providers and strong individuals is consistent with Black women's descriptions of themselves (Abrams, Maxwell, Pope, &

Belgrave, 2014; Woods-Giscombé, 2010), which also supports previous research describing shared roles and responsibilities and egalitarian gender roles beliefs among Black women and men (Vespa, 2009).

Our findings also revealed women in the current study to believe Black men have challenges connecting and committing to their partners and families. However, these perceptions were couched with descriptions of socio-historical circumstances beyond Black men's control. As described by participants, Black families have historically endured a lack of educational and employment opportunities, poverty, and disenfranchisement. All of these social barriers have attributed to a fractured familial structure and, at times, the inability of Black men to financially and emotionally support their families. According to participants, without the means to meet the traditional gender role expectation of providing for one's family, Black men have had difficulties with social and personal connectivity, which has contributed to uncommitted behaviors.

Practice Implications

Findings from our study have implications for researchers and practitioners who seek to understand Black male-female relationships and the socialization of Black boys. Because U.S. Black women are least likely to marry (Raley, Sweeney, & Wondra, 2015) and more likely to head single-parent households (Martin et al., 2015), the information presented herein may be used by clinicians and other practitioners to address and improve high rates of male-female relationship instability witnessed among Blacks, particularly as it relates to marriage. According to Pinderhughes (2002, p. 269), "the factors responsible for rising divorce rates in the U.S. and elsewhere—namely, the increased human lifespan, the transformation of women's roles, and the shift in values and beliefs about marriage and divorce—have also further weakened marital stability among Blacks." To the extent that contrasting gender role beliefs and values have played a significant role in the decline of Black male-female relationships, counselors and therapists should consider the views presented herein when addressing martial conflict. Juxtaposing Black women's perceptions of masculinity with those held by Black men could unearth some root causes of failed close relationships. For example, Black women in the current study stated that ideal Black men display strength by providing for their families. However, if Black men feel that Black women should share the role of provider, strains on the relationship due to gender role conflict may arise.

Understanding how Black women perceive Black men as providers is also important to better understanding their relationships with Black women. For example, perceptions of the traditional role of the male as a provider may be a source of conflict for Black couples when Black women make more money and/or are more educated than Black men are (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Parks, 2010; West, 2012). In fact, employment security is a contributor to whether Black men will enter or stay in a relationship (Catanzarite & Ortiz, 2002) because research suggests that Black men are less likely to enter into marriage when employment security is lacking. These factors may be related to lower marriage rates in Black communities and should be considered by therapists servicing Black clients with martial problems related to role conflict and/or financial security.

Additionally, in the current study Black women viewed men as uncommitted to families, which may reinforce expectations of Black women to be strong and independent (Abrams et al., 2014). Because these roles may collide with other gender role beliefs, the interpersonal relationships between Black women and men may be strained or become difficult to maintain (Aborampah, 1989; Lima, Davis, Hilyard, Jeffries, & Muilenburg, 2017). Black women may also be guarded and distrustful when entering into and committing in relationships. In fact, these beliefs might prevent relationships from forming. Although the exact source of these beliefs and tensions are largely unknown, racism and discrimination were implicated by participants in the current study and in previous sociological and psychological research as reasons for poor relationship quality between Black men and women (Simons et al., 2012).

Counseling Black couples about the potential impact of holding contrasting perceptions of Black male gender roles and related masculinity could be an important step in fostering stronger interpersonal and martial relationships. For example, establishing that Black women are aware that Black men's challenging circumstances shape maladaptive behaviors could assist in achieving mutual understanding. According to our participants, Black women across various life cycle stages recognize that Black men are strong despite enduring unfair societal treatment, and moreover, women are empathetic toward men's plight. If clinicians and or counselors focus on this awareness and recognition of positive attributes in couple's therapy, Black men may become more emboldened to engage in behavioral change because they may feel more supported and/or understood by their partners.

Therapeutic exercises that further dissect some of the gender role beliefs identified in our study may also help Black women better resolve relationship disappointment and then establish more realistic and feasible expectations for their partner. Building stronger inter- and intra-personal relationships is key to promoting wellness within Black communities. As such, clinicians, practitioners, and researchers should consider further unpacking the gender role beliefs shared by Black women in our study and other studies (e.g., Lima et al., 2017) to culturally tailor counseling services and/or develop alternative therapeutic approaches that account for culturally and gender-specific phenomena.

Identifying the Black male gender role beliefs of Black women also has implications for parenting and the socialization experiences of Black children. Living in the United States, which has historically allowed state-sanctioned brutality and murder of Black men and women, has forced Black parents to give their children, Black boys in particular, compulsory lessons about how they may be stereotypically perceived by the world (Edwards & Few-Demo, 2016; Hughes, 2014). Commonly referred to as "the talk," this conversation about social perceptions of and responses to Black manhood is viewed as a necessary survival tactic, a crucial teaching that must be imparted as early as possible (Hughes, 2014). In the research literature, such conversations are described as part of the process of racial socialization.

Racial socialization, in this instance, involves Black mothers informing and training their sons in what it means to be a Black man in the United States (Stevenson, 1995). Racial socialization involves parental discussions about historical and contemporary injustices that

prepares sons for a marginalized manhood filled with experiences of discrimination (Edwards & Few-Demo, 2016; Hughes et al., 2006). Given the number of Black women raising Black men, their perceptions of Black manhood significantly shape this socialization process, which underscores the importance of our findings. Through qualitative inquiry, we offered Black women a platform upon which to voice their opinions and perceptions of Black men's abilities, circumstances, and masculine expectations. Such rich and authentic data can be used to better understand and chart the socialization of Black boys. Practitioners may use findings of our study to begin conversations with Black women and/or family clients related to the importance of racial socialization. Several studies have shown positive psychosocial outcomes that are linked to racial socialization among Black children and adolescents (Neblett, Rivas-Drake, & Umaña-Taylor, 2012).

In addition to considering how Black women's views of Black men impact the rearing of sons, it is equally important to consider how such views may influence daughters. Given that gender role beliefs and schemas can be transmitted generationally (Sharp & Ispa, 2009; Tenebaum & Leaper, 2002) via observational learning and parental teachings, Black women parenting Black girls should be aware of their influence in shaping girls' views of Black men. This of course implies that differential treatment for boys and girls should be examined for implicit or explicit promotion of negative views of Black boys and men. For example, Black girls have been raised with higher expectations than boys and informed early on of the need to be strong and independent (Staples & Johnson, 1993; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). Mothers raising daughters with higher expectations imply that they have lower expectations for sons, which may shape Black girls' views of boys/men as indolent, uncommitted, and/or disenfranchised. It is possible that this socialization is cyclical in that it may influence Black boys' current and future expectations of women. For example, boys who see their mothers and sisters behaving independently and taking on roles traditionally held by men may subsequently expect such behavior to be normative in Black women.

It may also be beneficial for Black women to challenge their own unfavorable perceptions and recognize the potential for negative stereotypes to influence personal judgment. Clinicians who service Black mothers should consider the difficulty of identifying these potential biases and offer additional support when needed. Moreover, because media portrayals also contribute to negative stereotypes and images of Black men, parents should be advised to consider limiting and monitoring children's access. For example, if Black women hold beliefs of Black masculinity (e.g., strength and social disadvantage) that conflict with the media driven images and stereotypes of Black masculinity (e.g., aggressive and violent), negative child behavior outcomes related to authority, discipline, and autonomy may arise. Notably, stereotypes that Black men are dangerous criminals are particularly toxic and jeopardizing (Welch, 2016) because they inform internalized stereotypes in Black culture and have been used to justify criminal wrongdoing. To this extent, family therapists may utilize the gender role beliefs highlighted herein to better guide Black mothers in identifying parenting pitfalls and implementing culturally specific solutions to familial challenges related to gendered expectations.

Findings from the current study also have implications for intergroup interactions. For instance, views held by participants in our study (e.g., Black men taking on stereotypical

roles) may also be held by others in society and may serve to provide personal, social, and institutional justification for the disenfranchisement of Black men and boys. As highlighted by the “Black Lives Matter” movement and evidenced by the disproportionate killings of unarmed Black men, negative associations with Black manhood have produced harsh realities under which Black men live daily. These realities shape and are shaped by a myriad of micro, meso, and, macro level factors (McMahon & Kahn, 2017).

For example, views of Black men as irresponsible individuals capable of and intentional in deceitful behaviors (e.g., being uncommitted to families) may contribute to overwhelming and negative depictions in the media, unjust hiring/firing practices, high rates of imprisonment, racial disparities in sentencing, and disparate experiences of police brutality (Alexander, 2012; Eberhardt, Davies, Purdie-Vaughns, & Johnson, 2006; Eberhardt, Goff, Purdie, & Davies, 2004; Oliver, 2003). All these portrayals likely have deleterious health and social outcomes for the Black community (Belgrave & Allison, 2013).

Future Research

Findings from our study raise several questions for future research. One program of future research is examining how Black women’s gender role beliefs for Black men impact their own gender role beliefs as well as relationship decisions and child rearing practices. Future research should also investigate the extent to which Black men believe that there are circumstances beyond their control that may influence their gender role development and expression. Do they share similar sentiments of social restrictions? If so, how do such views impact their relational and parenting practices?

Future research might may also include more qualitative examinations of differences in Black gender ideologies. Findings may reveal variability in beliefs based on (a) father figure presence during childhood, (b) socioeconomic status, and/or (c) previous relationship history and current relationship status. For example, how might potentially contrasting perspectives serve or hinder the development of healthy social interactions? Studies geared in this direction could offer important insight that could be used to improve the effectiveness of couple and family therapy for Black families.

Limitations

The present study has a few limitations that we should acknowledge. One limitation was the format of the focus group questions. Questions asked were developed as part of a larger study on developing a measure of gender role beliefs of Black women. Although the present paper focused on questions pertaining to women’s perceptions of Black men, the questions that were asked previously may have affected their subsequent responses. Some of the questions may have guided participants’ responses, which may have limited emergence of views and beliefs. For example, asking about the ways Black men are different from men in other racial or ethnic groups may have prompted participants to respond by highlighting negative or positive characteristics.

Additionally, questions that asked women about gender role expectations of women differed from those that asked about gender role expectations of men. This may have prevented some women from expressing all of their beliefs about men. Other limitations are related to the

sample. The researchers recruited women who were diverse based on age, religion, and socioeconomic status. However, we did not inquire about the sexual orientation of the women in our study. Selecting women who were of varied sexual orientations would have added an additional level of diversity.

Also, we utilized a convenience sample of women who volunteered to participate in our focus groups. These women knew that they would take part in a group discussion about Black women's views of gender-related matters, and as such, they may have been more invested in sharing their experiences than were women who did not volunteer. Further, although a strength of our study is that we included women in a wide age range (from 18 to 91), we did not examine generational differences. This is an area of future research because there may be generational differences in Black women's perception of Black men.

Conclusion

In the United States, hegemonic ideologies concerning race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation are often so pervasive that it is difficult to conceptualize alternatives to them, let alone ways of resisting the social practices they justify (Collins, 2000, p. 284). Our study's findings suggest that Black women's perceptions of Black men are influenced by socio-historical disadvantages related to the Black experience in the United States. Defining Black masculinity as informed by a long history of marginalization, Black women's perceptions of Black men have relevant implications for Black family dynamics, socialization of Black children, and Black women's partnership decisions. Additional research is needed to investigate the impetus for the perceptions identified in our study, as well as the interpersonal, intrapersonal, and socio-cultural ramifications of these beliefs. Demonstrating the complexity of gender role beliefs as influenced by social and environmental factors, findings of the current study make timely and relevant contributions to the scholarly literature on the Black gender roles.

Acknowledgments

Research reported in the present paper was supported by the National Institute of Mental Health and the National Heart Lung and Blood Institute of the National Institutes of Health under Award Numbers R25MH087217 and F31HL122118, respectively. The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Institutes of Health.

References

Aborampah OM. Black male-female relationships: Some observations. Journal of Black Studies. 1989; 19(3):320–342. DOI: 10.1177/002193478901900030

Abrams JA, Javier SJ, Maxwell ML, Belgrave FZ, Nguyen AB. Distant but relative: Similarities and differences in gender role beliefs among African American and Vietnamese American women. Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology. 2016; 22(2):256–267. DOI: 10.1037/cdp0000038 [PubMed: 25938180]

Abrams JA, Maxwell M, Pope M, Belgrave FZ. Carrying the world with the grace of a lady and the grit of a warrior: Deepening our understanding of the "strong Black woman" schema. Psychology of Women Quarterly. 2014; 38(4):503–518. DOI: 10.1177/0361684314541418

Adams CJ. Respect and reputation: The construction of masculinity in poor African American men. Journal of African American Studies. 2007; 11(3-4):157–172. DOI: 10.1007/s12111-007-9021-6

Aldridge DP. Focusing: Black male-female relationships Chicago: Third World Press; 1991

Alexander M. The new Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness New York: The New Press; 2012

Banks RR, Gatlin SJ. African American intimacy: The racial gap in marriage. Michigan Journal of Race & Law. 2005; 11:115–671. Retrieved from http://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/mjrl11&div=12&id=&page=.

Belgrave FZ, , Allison KW, editorsAfrican American psychology: From Africa to America Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc; 2013

Bem SL. The measurement of psychological androgyny. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology. 1974; 42(2):155–162. DOI: 10.1037/h0036215 [PubMed: 4823550]

Bem SL. Gender schema theory: A cognitive account of sex typing. Psychological Review. 1981; 88(4):354.doi: 10.1037/0033-295X.88.4.354

Bem SL. The lenses of gender: Transforming the debate on sexual inequality New Haven, CT: Yale University Press; 1993

Bennett NG, Bloom DE, Craig PH. The divergence of black and white marriage patterns. American Journal of Sociology. 1989; 95(3):692–722. DOI: 10.1086/229330

Bowleg L, Teti M, Massie JS, Patel A, Malebranche DJ, Tschann JM. 'What does it take to be a man? What is a real man?': Ideologies of masculinity and HIV sexual risk among Black heterosexual men. Culture, Health & Sexuality. 2011; 13(05):545–559. DOI: 10.1080/13691058.2011.556201

Braun V, Clarke V. Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology. 2006; 3(2):77–101. DOI: 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Catanzarite L, Ortiz V. Too few good men? Available partners and single motherhood among Latinas, African Americans, and Whites. Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences. 2002; 24(3):278–295. DOI: 10.1177/0739986302024003002

Chambers AL, Kravitz A. Understanding the disproportionately low marriage rate among African Americans: An amalgam of sociological and psychological constraints. Family Relations. 2011; 60(5):648–660. DOI: 10.1111/j.1741-3729.2011.00673.x

Chaney C. Boys to men: How perceptions of manhood influence the romantic partnerships of black men. Western Journal of Black Studies. 2009; 33(2):110–122.

Chaney C, Robertson R. Racism and police brutality in America. Journal of African American Studies. 2013; 17(4):480–505. http://doi:10.1007/s12111-013-9246-5.

Cherlin AJ. Marriage and marital dissolution among Black Americans. Journal of Comparative Family Studies. 1998; 29(1):147–158. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41603552.

Collins PH. Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment New York: Routledge; 2002

Collins PH. Black sexual politics: African Americans, gender, and the new racism New York: Routledge; 2004

Cowdery RS, Scarborough N, Knudson-Martin C, Seshadri G, Lewis ME, Mahoney AR. Gendered power in cultural contexts: Part II. Middle class African American heterosexual couples with young children. Family Process. 2009; 48(1):25–39. DOI: 10.1111/j.1545-5300.2009.01265.x [PubMed: 19378643]

Creswell JW, , Poth CN. Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc; 2017

Diemer MA. Constructions of provider role identity among African American men: An exploratory study. Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology. 2002; 8(1):30–40. DOI: 10.1037/1099-9809.8.1.30 [PubMed: 12092427]

Eagly AH. Sex differences in social behavior: Comparing social role theory and evolutionary psychology. The American Psychologist. 1997; 52(12):1380–1383. DOI: 10.1037/0003-066X.52.12.1380.b [PubMed: 9414607]

Eberhardt JL, Davies PG, Purdie-Vaughns VJ, Johnson SL. Looking deathworthy: Perceived stereotypicality of Black defendants predicts capital-sentencing outcomes. Psychological Science. 2006; 17(5):383–386. https://ssrn.com/abstract=901453. [PubMed: 16683924]

Eberhardt JL, Goff PA, Purdie VJ, Davies PG. Seeing black: Race, crime, and visual processing. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology. 2004; 87(6):876–893. https://doi.org//10.1037/0022-3514.87.6.876. [PubMed: 15598112]

Edwards AL, Few-Demo AL. African American maternal power and the racial socialization of preschool children. Sex Roles. 2016; 75:56–70. DOI: 10.1007/s11199-016-0633-y

Erchull MJ, Liss M, Axelson SJ, Staebell SE, Askari SF. Well… she wants it more: Perceptions of social norms about desires for marriage and children and anticipated chore participation. Psychology of Women Quarterly. 2010; 34(2):253–260. https://doi.org//10.1111/j.1471-6402.2010.01566.x.

Flores T. 'New Jim Crow': Single Black female 2014 Retrieved from http://Black.jconline.com/story/opinion/columnists/2014/10/13/new-jim-crow-marriage-Black-women/17217909/

Ford KA. Doing fake masculinity, being real men: Present and future constructions of self among Black college men. Symbolic Interaction. 2011; 34(1):38–62. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/si.2011.34.1.38.

Hughes J. What Black parents tell their sons about the police 2014 Retrieved from http://gawker.com/what-Black-parents-tell-their-sons-about-the-police-1624412625

Hughes D, Rodriguez J, Smith EP, Johnson DJ, Stevenson HC, Spicer P. Parents' ethnic-racial socialization practices: A review of research and directions for future study. Developmental Psychology. 2006; 42(5):747–770. [PubMed: 16953684]

Jones MC, , Shorter-Gooden K. Shifting: The double lives of Black women in America New York: Harper Collins; 2003

Kitzinger J, , Barbour R, editorsDeveloping focus group research: Politics, theory and practice London: Sage; 1999

Levy GD, Fivush R. Scripts and gender: A new approach for examining gender-role development. Developmental Review. 1993; 13(2):126–146. DOI: 10.1006/drev.1993.1006

Lima AC, , Davis TL, , Hilyard K, , Jeffries WL, , Muilenburg JL. Individual, interpersonal, and sociostructural factors influencing partner nonmonogamy Acceptance among young African American women. Sex Roles 2017 Advanced online publication.

Martin JA, Hamilton BE, Osterman MJK, Driscoll AK, Mathews TJ. Births: Final data for 2015. National Vital Statistics Reports. 2017; 66(1):1–69. Retrieved from https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr66/nvsr66_01.pdf.

McMahon JM, , Kahn KB. When sexism leads to racism: Threat, protecting women, and racial bias. Sex Roles 2017 Advanced online publication.

Mincey K, Alfonso M, Hackney A, Luque J. The influence of masculinity on coping in undergraduate Black men. The Journal of Men's Studies. 2015; 23(3):315–330. DOI: 10.1177/1060826515605022

Neblett EW Jr, Rivas-Drake D, Umaña-Taylor AJ. The promise of racial and ethnic protective factors in promoting ethnic minority youth development. Child Development Perspectives. 2012; 6(3):295–303. DOI: 10.1111/j.1750-8606.2012.00239.x

O'Connor MK. Using qualitative research in practice evaluation. In: Roberts AR, , Greene GJ, editorsSocial workers' desk reference New York: Oxford University Press; 2001 775778

Oliver MB. African American men as "criminal and dangerous": Implications of media portrayals of crime on the "criminalization" of African American men. Journal of African American Studies. 2003; 7(2):3–18. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41819017.

Patterson GT, Swan PG. Police shootings of unarmed African American males: A systematic review. Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment. 2016; 26(3-4):267–278. DOI: 10.1080/10911359.2015.1125204

Peck SC, Brodish AB, Malanchuk O, Banerjee M, Eccles JS. Racial/ethnic socialization and identity development in Black families: The role of parent and youth reports. Developmental Psychology. 2014; 50(7):1897–1909. DOI: 10.1037/a0036800 [PubMed: 24798504]

Pinderhughes EB. African American marriage in the 20th century. Family Process. 2002; 41(2):269–282. https://doi.org//10.1111/j.1545-5300.2002.41206.x. [PubMed: 12140962]

Parks S. Fierce angels: The strong Black woman in American life and culture Toronto: Random House of Canada; 2010

Raley RK, Sweeney MM, Wondra D. The growing racial and ethnic divide in U.S. marriage patterns. The Future of Children / Center for the Future of Children, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation. 2015; 25(2):89–109. DOI: 10.1353/foc.2015.0014

Reid J. Single and living fab: Jacque Reid on how the 'angry Black woman' stereotype harms our relationships. The Grio 2014 Retrieved from http://thegrio.com/2014/02/06/single-and-living-fab-jacque-reid-on-how-the-angry-Black-woman-stereotype-harms-our-relationships/-54302878

Seale C, Silverman D. Ensuring rigour in qualitative research. The European Journal of Public Health. 1997; 7(4):379–384. DOI: 10.1093/eurpub/7.4.379

Sharp EA, Ispa JM. Inner-city single black mothers' gender-related childrearing expectations and goals. Sex Roles. 2009; 60(9–10):656–668. DOI: 10.1007/s11199-008-9567-3

Simons RL, Simons LG, Lei MK, Landor AM. Relational schemas, hostile romantic relationships, and beliefs about marriage among young African American adults. Journal of Social and Personal Relationships. 2012; 29(1):77–101. DOI: 10.1177/0265407511406897 [PubMed: 22328799]

Staples R, , Johnson LB. Black families at the crossroads: Challenges and prospects San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass; 1993

Stevenson HC. Relationship of adolescent perceptions of racial socialization to racial identity. Journal of Black Psychology. 1995; 21(1):49–70. DOI: 10.1177/00957984950211005

Tenenbaum HR, Leaper C. Are parents' gender schemas related to their children's gender-related cognitions? A meta-analysis. Developmental Psychology. 2002; 38(4):615–630. DOI: 10.1037/0012-1649.38.4.615 [PubMed: 12090490]

Varner F, Mandara J. Differential parenting of African American adolescents as an explanation for gender disparities in achievement. Journal of Research on Adolescence. 2014; 24(4):667–680. DOI: 10.1111/jora.12063

Vespa J. Gender ideology construction: A life course and intersectional approach. Gender & Society. 2009; 23(3):363–387. DOI: 10.1177/0891243209337507

Vohs KD, , Finkel EJ, editorsSelf and relationships: Connecting intrapersonal and interpersonal processes New York: Guilford Press; 2006

Welch K. Black criminal stereotypes and racial profiling. Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice. 2016; 23(3):276 –288. DOI: 10.1177/1043986207306870

West C. Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire, and their homegirls: Developing an "oppositional gaze" toward the images of Black women. In: Chrisler JC, Golden C, , Rozee PD, editorsLectures on the psychology of women 4. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, Inc; 2012 286299

Witt SD. Parental influence on children's socialization to gender roles. Adolescence. 1997; 32(126): 253. http://gozips.uakron.edu/~susan8/parinf.htm. [PubMed: 9179321]

Woods-Giscombé CL. Superwoman schema: African American women's views on stress, strength, and health. Qualitative Health Research. 2010; 20(5):668–683. DOI: 10.1177/1049732310361892 [PubMed: 20154298]

Table 1

Themes, Codes, Examples, and Frequencies

Theme/Subtheme	Codes	Example Quotes	Frequency (*n*, %)
Strong Armed and Strong Minded	• Mental strength • Resilience • Assertive • Leader • Hardworking • Physical strength	"Black men are strong willed…strong as much mentally as physically but more so mentally, they endure a lot more… If I don't see strength, you're not a man."	27 (61%)
Challenges with Familial and Personal Connections	• Untrustworthy • Lack of commitment to family • Unemotional	"Other races, typically they take responsibility … for their family but it's like Black males have like sat back and just been like 'whatever' and not … worry about it as they should be."	20 (43%)
Circumstances Beyond Their Control: Impact of the Black Experience	• Disadvantaged • Stereotyped • Multiple Barriers • Seen as unequal • Experience of Prejudice • Legal issues • Social pressure • Limited Resources • History of Pain	"Glass ceilings, glass walls keep our men from success and from their families. Our men are frustrated because they are blocked from opportunities. For them the promise of the American dream is now a nightmare – they know they're not going to get it but they keep trying and they're frustrated."	29 (66%)