"IT IS SIX WOMEN, BUT IT IS THEIR LIVES, IT IS THEIR LIVES":
BLACK WOMEN'S VOICES ABOUT THE EXPERIENCE OF SINGLEHOOD

by

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Abstract

There has been a decline in marriage rates in the U.S., with Black persons showing the lowest numbers in relation to other racial groups. Unlike previous generations where marriage was associated with a sense of familism, today marriage is associated with individual growth and the creation of a fulfilling relationship. To better understand how single Black women manage the tension between individuality and togetherness, a phenomenological study was conducted to explore the lived experience of singlehood of six Black women. Findings support Knudson-Martin's (1996) reframed concept of differentiation and previous studies pertaining to family and community values' influence on perspectives about gendered roles in marriage. Gendered power imbalance appears to be a main contributor to ambivalence about marriage although marriage remained to be valued and desired. Findings can prevent helping professionals from imposing our socialized worldview that values intact families, marriage, and gendered power equity on single Black clients. Clinical and research implications are discussed.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

Study indicates that the U.S. marriage rates are dropping, with Blacks showing the lowest numbers in comparison to other racial groups (National Center for Health Statistics, 2010; Cohn, et al., 2011). Research indicates that forming and maintaining romantic relationship is even more challenging for middle-class Black women who in general prefer partners of the same race (Banks, 2011). Black women outnumber their male counterparts with college degrees making it a challenge for them to find partners with the same education level (Banks, 2011; Fry & Cohn, 2010; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010; Wang, 2012). This however, is not the case for Black men as there is an increasing amount of interracial marriage among Black men. Among Black men who married in 2010, 24% did so outside their race in contrast with only 9% of Black female newlyweds (Wang, 2012).

Another factor that may contribute to low marriage rates for middle-class Black women is the fact that having a child is no longer reserved for married women. Black women are more likely to have unplanned pregnancies or conceive outside of marriage than any other group of women (Banks, 2011). The number of Black children born to unmarried parents is large with 52 percent of Black children living in single-mother families (Mather, 2010). Further, there are more single Black women who choose to adopt rather than wait to marry before having children (Blake, 2009).

Media's messages that promote independence and empowerment of women further endorse the idea that it is possible, if not desirable, to be single and successful (Burton & Tucker, 2009). Although single, independent and successful, these women value building families and some have found a way to do so by bearing or adopting a child without the support of a significant other. Their capacity to respond independently while maintaining connection with

those that compose the emotional field is evident (Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 1999). According to Knudson-Martin (2002), persons in less individualistic cultures and more spiritually inclined construct "self" as a "connected self" thus do not define their own identity as distinguished from the community, but rather, their identity is defined in terms of the family or community within which they are rooted. Maintaining a connected self appears to be the reality of single Black women. This reality however begs to be investigated. How do single Black women experience singlehood? How do they experience the connected self?

Although singlehood may not be seen as a viable option for the general population, it may be viable for Black women who have found a way to live their connected self. This study will explore the lived experience of single middle class Black women to develop an in-depth understanding of the potential viability of remaining single as well as the process that has led to this status. This understanding could prevent us from imposing our socialized worldview that values marriage and intact families. Clinicians and family service providers and educators can benefit from having a clearer understanding of singlehood seen from the perspective of those who remain single in their adult lives.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Decline of Marriage for Black Women

The marriage rates in the U.S. have declined since 1990 (Center of Disease Control, 2011). This decline is particularly evident among Blacks who value marriage; among women aged 35 to 44 years, higher percentages of non-Hispanic Black women (42%) have not married by the age of 35, compared to Hispanic women (17%) and to non-Hispanic White women (12%) (Goodwin et al., 2009). The decline in marriage among Blacks has been attributed to the difficulty they face in establishing and maintaining stable romantic relationships (Banks, 2011; Dickson, 1993). Some reasons that contribute to this lack of stable romantic relationship are described below.

Black women outnumber Black men in college more than two to one (Burton & Tucker, 2009). The general preference to having a spouse at the same education level contributes to the large number of possible romantic relationships for successful single Black men who do not have to rush to marry, unlike their White counterparts (Banks, 2011). This explains the phenomenon where "while Black women don't marry because they have too few options, some Black men don't marry because they have too many" (Banks, 2011, p. 59).

Marriage is no longer the sole form of union. There is an increase in cohabitation rates, as well as in the number of children born within cohabitation unions in the U.S. (National Center for Health Statistics, 2010). It is interesting to note that even though non-Hispanic Black women had the lowest percentage for ever being married (26%) in relation to Hispanic women (58%) and non-Hispanic White women (63%), they share similar patterns for having ever cohabited: 51% of non-Hispanic White and non-Hispanic Black, and 49% of Hispanic. Lower levels of education seem to be a strong factor influencing the tendency for cohabitation: 28% of women

with no High School diploma or GED have had two or more cohabiting relationships compared to 11% of those with Bachelor's degree or higher (National Center for Health Statistics, 2010). On the other hand, higher education level seems to be related to increased rates of marriage among Black women (Torr, 2011). In 2011, Black women with some college education were more likely to be married than their counterparts with high school diploma (Torr, 2011). While having higher education may reduce the options for marital partners for Black women, it is not a main reason for reduced marriage rates.

Considering the low number of middle-class Black men, one would assume that interracial marriage could be another option for middle-class Black women (Emery & White, 2006; Banks, 2011). However, even though rates for interracial marriages have increased, trends differ by race and sex. While there are an increasing number of Black men marrying women from another racial group this is not the case for Black women (Wang, 2012; Banks, 2011). This difference is reflected in the fact that only 5.5 percent of Black women married someone from other racial group compared to about 24 percent of Black men that did the same in 2008 (Passel, et al., 2010).

A highly educated Black man has a greater tendency to marry a White woman even if she is less educated than him due to the benefit of "status exchange." The high-earning Black man would benefit from having a White spouse, and the less-educated White female would benefit from his economic status (Banks, 2011). This status exchange does not apply to Black women because of their preference for a Black husband than a husband from another race. Furthermore, issues regarding group status, stereotypes, and white standards of beauty could influence non-Black men's reluctance to partner with Black women (Banks, 2011). This observation was supported by a study with Internet daters (Feliciano, et al., 2009). It was found

that racial preference plays a more important role than religious preference among White Internet daters with 50% of White men indicating a racial preference, whereas only 23% of White men expressed a religious preference. Among those that indicated racial preference, Black women were the least preferred.

Black women are raised with the message that they need to work hard, to do their best, to have their own money, and to never be dependent on a man (Banks, 2011). The message that they get is to lower their expectations about their potential romantic partner. These women are told that if they are alone, it is their fault, as their standards and expectations are too high. Black women have indeed increasingly married men with lower level of education, and with lower earnings than any other group of women in the U.S. Considering that there is an increase in number of college-educated Black women getting married to Black men with no college degree, the high level of difference in education level between partners could also imply a big gap in terms of cultural experience and values. This has made Black women the group of women that marry-down more frequently than any other racial group of women in the U.S. (Emery & White, 2006; Burton & Tucker, 2009; Banks, 2011). The biggest problem with the high rates of marry-down among Black women is that when there is a large educational gap between partners, the Black wives' happiness is affected the most (Furdyna, et al., 2008). That could be one reason why the divorce rates are the highest among Black couples than for any other racial groups -- marry-down relationships are more prone to dissolve (Burton & Tucker, 2009; Banks, 2011).

As the discrepancy between the number of educated Black men and Black women favors men, Black man may have more power and advantage. Black men have higher chances of having more power in the relationship because he has more options outside of it (Treas & Giesen, 2000). As a consequence some single Black women lower their requirements for intimate relationship,

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and accept being in a non-committed relationship, possibly with polygamy, and that provides companionship, intimacy, passion, and emotional support (Banks, 2011). In addition, Black women's preference for Black men may be because these women believe that a non-Black man would not be interested in them, and most importantly, they may believe that only Black men would know how to relate well and appreciate them (Emery & White, 2006; Banks, 2011).

The preference for Black men may also be related to Black cultural expectations about Black men's characteristics known as "swag," which is normally not observed in White men. "Swag embodies a model of black masculinity that … is part leader and part outlaw. The man with swag is one who sets his own agenda and refuses to abide by anyone else's. A man with swag leads rather than follows. And he's not afraid to let others know it" (Banks, 2011, p. 135). Although Black women seek a man with swag and that is supportive, has a stable job, and treats women well (Dickson, 1993; Banks, 2011), these women often seem to not have many models of women who indeed had a positive experience with a "good Black man" (Dickson, 1993). Instead, there seems to be a message that when in a relationship, Black men are abusive and unreliable, and Black women will end up in a relationship with one anyway, so they better lower their expectations about a "good man" (Dickson, 1993).

Black women may also feel pressured to marry a man from their own race as not to betrayal to her culture, and other men in their life: father, grandfather, and other male ancestors. Having a White man as a lover could mean going against the achieved freedom, similar to "sleeping with the enemy" (Banks, 2011). Besides memories of discrimination and marginalization, some Black women feel and fear that White men want to simply "possess" them and have an "exotic adventure," resonances of sexual relationships between master and slave.

The potential of having a light-skinned child from an interracial marriage, who is "Black enough" could further risk not perpetuating the Black culture (Banks, 2011).

Unfortunately, even if Black women who have worked hard to get a degree and attain middle-class status choose to become unwed mothers, they will be labeled "baby mama" and thought of as morally irresponsible and inclined to have other children by different men (Banks, 2011). In order to avoid the discrimination of being a single mother, seen as irresponsible and promiscuous, some women choose to adopt a child to meet their dreams of motherhood. The rise in adoptions by Black women has been documented by The National Center for Health Statistics (2008). According to the report, in 2002, non-Hispanic Black women were 25% more likely to be seeking to adopt in comparison to other women. This rise ins single adoption however may be due to a variety of reasons such as fertility issues, the social pressure, and dream of motherhood and the transmission of cultural values (Banks, 2001; Blake, 2009).

Black Ancestors and the Impact of Socialization

In order to better understand the phenomenon of the decline in marriage rates among Black women, it is fundamental to consider their process of socialization (Emery & White, 2006). The study of single middle-class Black women's experience of singlehood should reflect aspects that are unique to each participant's experience. Further, it should also consider the impact of the participants' socialization and possible ways that the broader social context might influence the process that has led to singlehood. From this perspective, when studying aspects related to Black culture, it is fundamental to consider aspects of African culture that have impacted U.S. Black individuals (Dickson, 2007). One of the most important aspects of African culture that will be considered in this study is the value of familism.

In African culture, there is the belief that one can only define his or her own identity in relation to the community which could include the family unit, consisting of parents, children and grandparents; the clan, composed by many families, all connected to each other through a totem that represents a sense of belongingness and togetherness; and the nations or tribes, composed by several clans, distinguished by a unique history, a common culture, and a particular political, social and economic organization (Dickson, 2007). Culturally, the connection with others goes beyond the limits of life. Individuals might stay connected through spirit to loved ones even after they have died. Therefore, there is a sense that ancestors are looking after those who are in this world. As a consequence, the sense of kinship is fundamental in defining one's identity -- "I am because we are, we are therefore I am" (Mbiti, 1990, p. 104). The sense of connection with "blood" or "play" members is very strong and this connection makes individuals loyal, with important responsibilities to take care of others, regardless of blood connection.

Although Blacks in the U.S. are believed to have roots in Africa, not all Blacks embrace or feel a sense of connection with Africa. This is especially true with each generation being more removed from their African heritage and more integrated into the wider American culture. As such, familism, while still evident among Blacks in the U.S., may not resemble the way it is observed in Africa. Familism in the U.S. is best described as a hybrid between individualism and familism where independence while accepted, is not to be exercised without due adherence to family obligations.

Theoretical Framework

The possible tension that is posed from the desire and need to be independent and self-sufficient and the natural inclination to want to uphold values of familism (Mbiti, 1990) can be elucidated by the concept of differentiation proposed by Knudson-Martin (1996) (Appendix A).

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Knudson-Martin (1996) proposed a reframed concept of differentiation that was originally proposed by Murray Bowen (1978). According to Knudson-Martin, differentiation encompasses both the person's ability to define the self as in relationship with others, as well as the ability to maintain emotional connection. Therefore, individuality and togetherness, instead of being antagonistic forces are fundamental elements in the process of differentiation that reinforce and facilitate each other. Based on this model, both forces guide the process of differentiation with not one being more important than the other. Levels of differentiation are distinguished based on the orientation of differentiation whereby one could be more inclined towards individuality, or togetherness, or able to strike a balance between the two continuums.

According to this view, the individuality dimension is related to the person's ability to function as an autonomous self, in control of his or her own impulses and maintain a private world, and self-sufficiency. The togetherness dimension, on the other hand, is related to the capacity of being oriented to another, of having empathy, and of giving up oneself to benefit others (Knudson-Martin, 1996). In this instance, the differentiation of self-typology is based on different levels of individuality and togetherness. Lower levels of both individuality and togetherness would be an "undifferentiated self", characterized by emotion fusion, self-absorption or absorption with others, and high levels of anxiety, which can lead to emotional volatility and/or distancing. Those high in individuality but low in togetherness could be considered as having a "separate self". These persons have control over their own impulses, have personal agency, as well as the capacity for independence. The opposite would be the "connected self" that refer to persons with high levels of togetherness and low levels of individuality. These persons have the capacity to connect with others, attend to others' needs, have high levels of empathy, yet have a tendency to be embedded in relationships. Lastly, the "integrated self" is

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characterized by high levels of togetherness and individuality. These persons present mutual giving and taking in relationships and show interdependence.

Based on social and cultural expectations, women tend to have a "connected self" while men have a tendency to have a "separate self" (Knudson-Martin, & Mahoney, 1999). In the process of becoming more differentiated, men and women may face some obstacles that are mainly created based on cultural perspectives about gender and power. Thus, gender differences are embedded in power differences and lead to unequal relationships. According to this view, notions of gender are mainly influenced by the broader social context. When in a relationship, partners will recreate gender patterns developed from interactions with others.

Relational development however, is thought to be different than differentiation (Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 1999), as it refers to one's capacity to be in relationship with another person -- evolving from the ability to direct oneself toward another and make oneself visible to another. Each of these components reflects the person's beliefs about self and others, as well as behaviors and skills. Relational development is said to be markedly influenced by cultural context. Historically women's roles have been to be more affectionate, to be more invested in making connection and making relationships work. In order to make relationships happen, there is a tendency to make parts of oneself invisible. In contrast, men have been expected to be the one "in charge" and to function autonomously thus relational development is not seen as a priority.

Although there have been changes in the social context, mainly due to women taking more space in the workforce, gender differences are still apparent and women are still expected to be empathic and dependent on men, and men are still expected to be the main provider for the family (Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 1999). It makes sense then that self-development for

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women should be seen as interdependent with relationship maintenance involving making connections and being in a relationship with others. As such "the ability to maintain relationships is then central to women's identity, and the relationship itself becomes a source for self-esteem and core to healthy development of self" (Knudson-Martin, 1996, p. 189). The demands for women to become more independent while maintaining their connectedness with their families and community appears to be captured by this reframed model of differentiation proposed by Knudson-Martin (1996). As such, this reframed model will be used to conceptualize and better understand the challenges faced by single Black women as they contemplate and decide their futures.

Research Questions

One of the current challenges faced by Black persons in the 21st century is a shift from familism, a focus on the connection and loyalty to the community, to a focus on individualism, with the goal being the individual's happiness (Dickson, 1993). As a consequence, women from more collectivist and egalitarian groups such as Black (Johnson, & Staples, 2005) are said to develop a sense of self as the interplay between individuality and togetherness. The question that begs to be asked is:

How do single Black women manage the tension between individuality and togetherness and what is their lived experience of this process?

Subsequent questions to the main research question above are:

- How do the social, cultural (such as gender, race, religion etc.) and economic contexts influence these women's perspectives about romantic relationships?

- How do they perceive romantic relationship?

- What do they expect from romantic relationships?

- What does it mean for them to be single?

- How do they perceive their family and community's reaction in relation to their

  decision about singlehood?

- How do they maintain connection with their family and their community as a single

  person?

- What are their views about starting a family?

Chapter 3 - Methods

Phenomenology

Although the literature discusses factors that could contribute to the decline in rates of marriage among Black women, it does not provide information that helps us better understand the process that has led to Black women's singlehood. In order to elicit this process, an in-depth study of the lived experience of these women is necessary. Because this process of singlehood is not well understood, it presents itself as a phenomenon to be discovered. In order to facilitate this examination, a phenomenological approach was utilized.

The phenomenological approach is an attempt to explore the meaning of the lived experience of the phenomenon under investigation through the perspective of those who have experienced it (Patton, 2001). Guided by a phenomenological approach, this study is an attempt to describe in a full and deep way the meaning and the essence of the lived experience of singlehood for Black women. For this, in-depth interviews were conducted with those who are currently living singlehood. Considering that phenomenology is intended to fully and deeply understand the phenomenon under investigation through the lens of those who have experienced it, the use of this approach facilitated the understanding of each participant's personal knowledge and subjectivity.

The phenomenological approach facilitated the understanding of each Black woman's unique experience of singlehood and the process that has led to this status. This approach helps uncover the essence of an experience that is reached by the full and deep description, explanation and interpretation of the phenomenon by those who experience it and make a meaning of that experience (Patton, 2001). The meaning making process occurs based both on the actual

experience of the phenomenon and on the person's process of description and interpretation of that experience.

Therefore, by listening to each participant's unique experience of singlehood, the researcher tried to understand each participant's interpretation and meaning of singlehood. Further, the researcher was also attentive in identifying what are the common aspects of that experience, so that it was possible to better understand what the essence of the experience of singlehood is for Black women. For this, the researcher had a phenomenological attitude, in that she was aware of personal bias, viewpoints, or assumptions in order to understand the phenomenon without prejudgments (Patton, 2002).

Participants

In order to participate in this study, participants needed to meet the following criteria: women aged 30 or older who identified as single, have attained a college degree and self-identify as middle-class and Black/African American. Voluntary participation was sought through the referral of friends and colleagues, and through publicly-posted flyers in local churches. Participants were not enticed by any incentives. The researcher recruited 6 participants for this study. The participants' age ranged from 36 to 65 years. Of the six participants, one was currently dating and none indicated that they were in a committed relationship. One participant was in her senior year of dual college/masters degree, while other participants had either completed college or graduate education. With the exception of one, participants were mothers. Four out of the six participants had been previously married. In addition, two were widowed and three were divorced. With the exception of one participant, most of participants' siblings were not currently married. All but one participant was raised in an environment with two guardians: either mother and father or mother and stepfather.

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Design and Procedure

Participants were interviewed individually by the researcher using a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix B). The location of the interview was determined by the participants. The interviews were conducted either at the participant's office or in a local coffee shop. The interviews ranged from 70 to 120 minutes. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim for analysis, including the mention of pauses, false starts, and unfinished sentences. The researcher completed all the interviews and transcriptions.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed by the researcher with assistance of her major professor and a classmate in her program. Analysis was guided by the voice-centered relational method (Gilligan, et al., 2003). This method entails more than just reading the data (transcribed interviews) for general themes. Rather readings were done with the objective of listening to the multiple voices present in the participants' narrative about their experience of the phenomenon. This method of reading is known as the listening guide that assumes that each person's unique voice is crossed by multiple voices, such as the culture, the self, and others.

The listening guide includes four sequential listenings, which includes: 1) listening for the plot, 2) writing "I-poems", 3) listening for contrapuntual voices, and 4) composing an analysis. The need for multiple listenings comes from the notion that the psyche is composed by multiples voices, such as the self, others, culture or context. These voices can be in conflict or in harmony in different parts of the narrative.

The listening guide (Gilligan, et al., 2003) is a voice-centered relational approach because the analyst is purposefully an active member analyzing the data by making notes of own feelings and impressions about the interviews then the analyst listens to the participants' first-person

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voice and only after that is attention turned to answer the research question. The listening guide method is particularly important for this study because through this method, "together, interviewer and interviewee produce narrative accounts, depending not only on the open-ended questions of the interviewer and the experiences of the narrator, but also on the social location of both" (Taylor, 1996, p. 121).

In the first step, "listening to the plot", the analyst made notes of the first impressions of the interview, and how, as a listener, she made sense of what was said by the interviewee. For this step, the analyst tried to identify the landscape of what was told, what were the themes and the larger social contexts. In addition, the analyst's thoughts and feelings that emerged from listening to the stories being told and how it could affect her understanding of what was being told was noted. In the second step, "I poems" were used to carefully listen to the participant's first-person voice, and how each participant spoke about herself. For this, the analyst selected a passage in the interview and underlined every first-person "I" with the verb and other important words. Then, maintaining the sequence in which these expressions appeared in the interview, the "I-poem" was created. By choosing different passages of the interview, it was possible to identify potential variations in a first-person voice that could indicate different themes, harmony, or dissonances.

In the third step, "listening for contrapuntal voices", the analyst was interested in identifying the presence of multiple voices in the participant's expression of her experience. The analyst was attentive to identify the presence of the voice of self, the culture voice, and the family voice in Black women's expression of their experience of singlehood, and how these voices move in relation to one another. In the fourth and last step, "composing an analysis", the analyst put together what was found in previous steps in relation to the research question. In

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addition, the analyst explored the interviews in relation to each other in order to identify possible themes that emerged in several interviews.

Person of the Researcher

My personal interest in this topic comes from a great admiration that I have towards those that overcome adversity. I truly admire those that develop the confidence that it might be possible to attain success and pursue individual goals and not have to cut off from their roots.

I am Latina, nonblack. In my country, Brazil, I am officially identified as White, and I do not have any family members that are Black. However, I come from a country in which, as in the U.S., Black people have a sad history of discrimination and prejudice rooted in slavery. I know that the experiences of Brazilian Blacks might be different from those of American Blacks due to cultural idiosyncrasies and the social contexts. Nonetheless, regardless of the country of origin, Blacks have a rich culture and admirable resilience.

As a side note, I would like to express my personal hesitation with using the term Black, because in my (Brazilian-Portuguese) culture, the term Black is considered a derogative and racist means of referencing the group. However, after participants themselves identified as Black and preferred to be referred to as Black, "Black" was used in the results section onwards to honor the participants' self-identification. This term was used thorough the document to provide consistency.

As an international student in the U.S., I have been categorized as a non-traditional student and as part of a minority group for the first time in my life. Aside from my personal experiences of prejudice and discrimination in the U.S., which perhaps have helped me be more focused towards reaching my academic goals, this has been a unique opportunity for me to re-define myself as a Brazilian woman. This process of re-definition had me compare myself to the

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other racial groups around me. I find that my experience is not too different from Black women who have completed college, attained middle-class status and are now faced with the challenge of choosing between individuality and togetherness. Similar to U.S. citizens, I too want to be independent and self-sufficient; however this is antecedent to expectations of my culture that values connectedness and interdependence.

Black women who have achieved success through education appear to experience a similar dilemma. However, the challenge they face in finding a suitable spouse has not prevented some Black women from experiencing motherhood. These women have found ways to become mothers, either biologically or through adoption, which has allowed them to feel a sense of connection to their community. Perhaps we face the same dilemma between reaching personal/professional goals (individuality) and obeying/staying connected to our culture (togetherness). This tension between individuality and togetherness that I appear to share with Black women has ignited my curiosity to know more about how these women manage this tension.

Chapter 4 - Findings

Findings from the data were collapsed into the following themes: a) meaning of singlehood; b) perceptions of marriage; c) relationship with family and community; d) social and cultural influences on perspective about marriage; e) life satisfaction and ambivalence about marriage. The themes are explained below and excerpts from the transcripts in the form of quotes or I-poems are utilized to illustrate these themes.

Prior to exploring the themes that emerged, it is important to highlight the background of the participants. Their context has clearly impacted their identity as Black women and their experience of singlehood.

According to the participants, to be a Black woman means to be proud of one's heritage. Being a Black woman is related to being dedicated to the family and it carries the responsibility of holding the family together, even in difficult circumstances. Being a Black woman means being strong, having a solid connection to her moral and religious values, as one participant related in the following I-poem:

> *I am very strong*
> *I am very proud*
> *I am very strong person*
> *I am very spiritual*
> *I am very, very dedicated to family. (#2)*

The participants mentioned that they developed their concept about what it is to be a Black woman from the women around them when they were growing up, especially from their mothers. Participants stated that there is an expectation of them to be strong, of holding the family together and they want to and are proud of meeting this expectation. The definition of

what it means to be a Black woman and the expectations that accompany it was evident in this one narrative:

> *I think that they are from my background, there are Black women that I was raised around, is that Black women are strong, a very, very strong women, and they are the people who have to keep families together. And that's, and I remember that is because I became a mom, and one of the things I think about Black women came from the standards that my mom said. And, um, my mom is very strong, she worked hard to keep the family together, she, um, always had a job, always believed to have a job, um, never really believed that taking hands out from anyone, the work, she has to be independent, um, very caring, um, playing to be the role, multiple roles, she had multiple roles. That is, that what it means to be a Black woman, that is what I am. (#3).*

Some of these women grew up in a time when there was either legal segregation or when they could still experience its residuals. For this reason, being part of the Black community was very reassuring to them. As one participant exemplified that the experience of racism and feelings of exclusion were present during that time and the support gained from the Black community was particularly important:

I went in an area that we dealt with discrimination and segregation, and during that period of time, Black women, they were looked different than White women. So as a Black woman, growing up in a Black community, one had to, you know, you are fine within the Black community, but when you went outside of the Black community, people would make a sign of your status, according to your, to the color of your skin. So if you didn't really know who you were, as a Black, often times you could be upset of the system, because not only you are not recognized as important or, um, or some time you would not be recognized at all. Yes, so, the

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thing is that knowing that you are raised with an identity, knowing that you are Black, being part

of a community where people are, are happy, are, are thrilled because of who they are, you

know, within their community. Then when you step outside of that community, you are okay. (#3)

Besides experiences of prejudice and racism, all participants experienced stressors related to

socio-economic status. Some of these women were raised in some level of poverty; others had

financial difficulties associated with divorce or death of a husband. However, all participants

identify themselves as middle-class citizens. Although overall satisfied with their current socio-

economic status, they consider that there is room for growth, as this participant stated:

> *I grew up in poverty, so I know already how it is like. And, I mean, but at the same time, I*
>
> *do okay for myself, but I just feel like there is still a lot more, like, I could do better, you*
>
> *know, I feel like I could do better. (#4)*

Most of the participants of this study had been previously married. Among them, two

were widowed and three were divorced. Overall, it seemed that participants considered a "good"

marriage a relationship characterized by partnership:

> *I said, look, I am working here, and you got help out with this cooking, so he did. And it*
>
> *was great, um, I never felt over burnt, you know. He was really attentive, um, lot of fun,*
>
> *he had a great sense of hum, um, we, um, shared a lot, we had, we loved sports, you*
>
> *know, and travel, we liked to save things, we did art things together, um, even shopping*
>
> *with him was fine.(#5)*

While a good marriage was described as partners sharing duties and beliefs, a relationship

that did not work well was characterized by differences in life goals, and a discrepancy in power.

The unbalance in power in marriage was defined by one woman as related to the fact that she

was the one making more money:

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All of a sudden, I was the bread winner. Now it was different to me, and I realized, I will

be very honest, I didn't like it, because I realized that the person that makes that

prominent money has the power. And I realize that there were times later that I used that

power against, against, against my husband or against the marriage, and it is because I

had the money. (#1)

Besides the discrepancy in power was also a component that made one participant leave

her previous marriage. According to her, her previous husband, while in a position of power, was

abusive towards her. Although during her interview, this woman stated that she wanted to get

remarried, her voice is captured in the following I-poem as someone who had to speak up for

herself and whose experience of intimate partner violence had made her concerned about

marriage:

> *It was horrible. Um, I was physically and mentally abused*
> *I just felt that it was time for me to get out*
> *I left*
> *I think that it set up the tone for the rest of my life*
> *I would never want to get married again*
> *I would never want someone to have that sort of power over me.*
> *So I never married again. (#2)*

These women indicated that they considered themselves strong, they valued family and

they saw the value of following what was expected from them in regards to keeping family

members together. Although having a positive view about marriage, it seemed that they would

not want to be in a relationship in which there was power imbalance, but rather one in which

they could have their voice heard.

Meaning of Singlehood

Singlehood as a Choice

Singlehood was a choice for most of participants because they believed that if they wanted, they would be married. Most of them indicated that they did not consider singlehood bad and this perception was related to their sense of self-worth:

What is that like to be single. Um, [pause], it is not a bad thing. I mean, I, I see it as the choice. You know, it is not that I am this unappealing person who can't be in a relationship. Um [pause] I, I don't feel sad, or lonely, or, or, um, that I am like losing out, or something like that. (#6)

However, most of the participants stated that they wanted to be (re)married and that they were confident about what they were looking for in a partner; they just had not met the person who would fulfill their expectations. Although not clearly planning on being single, this participant knew what she wanted and she was not willing to marry just for the status of being married.

I don't know if
I planned on being single, it is just how it has happened.
I guess
I was not 'oh yeah, I will be single'.
I don't plan
I didn't plan on being single,
> *it is just some relationships didn't work, you know, some of them don't, and*
> *circumstances led me to not want to settle just to settle for a guy. And that is what*
I tell people,
I know that if
I wanted to get married,
I know
I could probably find somebody to marry
I don't want to just marry someone
I want to be in a relationship
> *and be healthy and strong, and all of the other things. (#4)*

Having the confidence in oneself seemed to be particularly important as participants got older. Beyond of physical attraction, the man had to be interested in her as a person: *"When you start to get older, you have to recognize that there is a difference, you know, you have to basically find someone that wants to be with you as you, and someone that really cares about you."* (#2) As a consequence, participants stressed the need of a woman to know herself better, to identify her values and what she tolerates in a relationship, as demonstrated in the following I-poem:

> *People say*
> *I am picky, you know, when*
> *I am dating*
> *I am picky,*
> *I don't say*
> *I am picky*
> *I say that*
> *I learned,*
> *I learned,*
> *I learned*
> *I learned from this kind of guy, and dating this person*
> *I learned a lot about myself,*
> *I know what*
> *I really tolerate, what*
> *I can tolerate. (#1)*

While others considered them being "picky", participants named it confidence in knowing what they wanted and what they needed. Maturity seemed to be a factor that could influence both the perspective about romantic relationships and level of attractiveness.

Experience of Singlehood Shaped by Experience of Being a Single Parent

Five out of six participants of this study were mothers. Therefore, experiences of being a single mother are markedly present in the participants' narrative about their experience of singlehood. The participants recognize the challenges associated with being a single mother, however, they acknowledge the importance of the connection with family and/or community in

helping raise their children. The struggles about suddenly becoming a single parent, the

movement towards getting the support from family of origin, and the priority given to raising her

child above her individual desires are pronounced in the following I-poem:

> *I came back*
> *I was a single parent*
> *I mean, I was a stay-home mom*
> *I was a stay-home mom. When my husband died,*
> *I was a stay-home mom.*
> *I never,*
> > *my ambition always was to be a parent, being a mother*
>
> *I would.*
> *I went to college the first time around to get my MRS.*
> > *That was all what*
>
> *I wanted.*
> *I didn't want for any other reason.*
> *I got my husband,*
> *I was done.*
> *I was done.*
> *I went through my third year.*
> *I got married,*
> *I was done.*
> > *So my intent was never to work.*
>
> *I was never thinking to pursuing.*
> > *So when my husband died so young, the only thing*
>
> *I could think was to come back because*
> *I needed family,*
> *I needed the support,*
> *I needed them to support me.*
> > *But the part of that, was is like, okay, my mother was married to my stepfather*
> > *and also, my mother did not marry until*
> > *I was 11 years old.*
> > *I still grew up in that type of family.*
>
> *I wanted my son to understand that this isn't supposed to be a family.*
> > *There is supposed to be a mother, a father, there supposed to be a household of*
>
> *support.*
> *I came, that Midwest to be able to have that stability.*
> *I don't think*
> *I that*
> *I would be able to make it through, hadn't be my family.*
> *I have the commitment to that child,*
> > *and so anything else that*
>
> *I wanted to do became so secondary because*
> *I was a parent*

I was a mother
I was a mother before
I was anything else. (#1)

Participants who are mothers recognize the difficulties in raising a child as single parent. Although challenging, these participants were able to name some of the advantages of being a single parent. These advantages seemed to be associated with the transmission of their "own" values to their children and insulate their children from potentially negative values/habits of their biological father. As stated by one woman,

It is an advantage because, I see as advantage because being a single mother and raising

my kids by myself, I could teach them all the values that I wanted to teach them. Um,

whereas if they were, they were raised with their dad, then they would have to pick, have

to put the smocking, he was a smoker, he drink occasionally, he was a drinker, not an

alcoholic by any means, but he drinks, he smokes, and he didn't go to church, so I figure

that, you know, I could teach them some of the, he didn't, he didn't go to school, he didn't

go to college. So I think it was advantageous for them to, um, to be a single parent

because they were acquiring the maneuvers and doing the things I wanted to do with my

children, and teach them the values that I wanted them to have. (#3)

In conjunction with the transmission of their own values, without potential questionings or disagreements with the father, these women made sure to teach their children some lessons that seemed to be connected to their own experience of being single mothers. These lessons were related to the importance of gaining their own independence, which is associated to gaining higher education. In relation to the experience of being a single mother, one participant shared:

It has been both hard and rewarding. I worked, during her life, I worked three jobs at a

time, and I just wanted her to grow up to learn that you have to be self-reliant and self-

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sufficient and don't depend on a man to depend on you. I wanted her to have her own

education so whatever happens in life, she could take care of herself. I also wanted her to

be a strong person and I wanted her to realize that you don't need to grow and be on

welfare and let the state take care of you, that's not what life is about. You need to work

hard every single day and just do what you need to do. (#2)

With the exception of one participant, the other participants that are mothers became single "again" when their children were still young. Therefore, the experience of singlehood seemed to have two phases – 1) when their children were growing up in the household; 2) when their children left the nest. After this second phase, there women had to reconfigure their singlehood status. Now that the children have left the home, mainly to go to college, these women consider that aside from adapting to the feelings of the "empty nest", they have started to discover other aspects related to being single, such as dating. A participant made a reference to these two phases of her singlehood:

To be single and to have children is different from being single and having no children in

the house, because, my children are now grown, so and age plays a factor too. Um, the

biggest thing, I finally realize now how to be single because [laughs] it is kind of funny.

Um, I won't, I won't, even though you are single, and you have kids, you can't just go out

there and do, you can't really get out there and date… So now that my children have

grown and they have their own life, and I am finished with my education, now I can see

how it is like to date. (#3)

Raising the children as single parent seemed to be one of the biggest challenges in participants' lives, and they could count on the support from family members and the community. Participants made sure to state that they were able to transmit their values to their

children, especially in relation to the importance of family and to being independent. Now that

their children have left the nest, participants reported a new phase of their singlehood, as now

they can focus solely on identifying their individual needs and strengths, and reach their personal

goals in life.

Singlehood Related to Dating

Participants seemed to associate singlehood to dating. However most of them, especially

those who were married before, stated that they do not like dating because they consider that the

dating scene has changed since they were married. According to them, dating is currently

associated to lack of commitment and this is not what they are looking for. As illustrated by one

participant, people should be intentional about dating, as this could be potentially a step towards

a more committed relationship:

> *I think is that, okay, when you date, you should date a mate, and, and so, you should date*
>
> *people who, I am not saying you are going marry this person, but you should date people*
>
> *who if on a paper, 'Would you marry this person on paper?' (#1).*

Some participants considered that dating used to be seen as a step towards a more

committed relationship. However, reporting a possible conflict between generations, one

participant expressed her frustration with the younger generation and their acceptance of dating

as a synonymous of lack of commitment. According to her, lower rates in marriage in the Black

community are the result of this lack of commitment:

> *I think that dating, which I detest, has, has, it has changed so much, and, you know, like I*
>
> *said, people are not willing to commit, and, it is like, my dating now is so different than*
>
> *when I was in my twenties. Um, there are things that I would have accepted when I was*

younger, and now, I think I am, I am myself more regarded, I am myself more

protected.(#1)

Perceptions of Marriage

It is important to note that when asked about their perceptions of romantic relationships, all participants talked about their views of marriage. Although not all participants expressed current interest in getting married, all of them indicated that they have had thoughts about marriage. Even participants that indicated that singlehood is a choice said that they did not plan on being single. Instead, they have always thought about getting married. The voice of one participant that had thoughts about getting married is captured in the following I-poem:

> *I don't know*
> *I don't know if*
> *I ever said and thought*
> *I want to be single,*
> *I did think*
> *I wanted to get married*
> *I remember as a kid thinking*
> *I want to get married. (#6)*

Participants of this study emphasized that they have a positive perspective about marriage: "*I think marriage is the best thing there is. Um, it is a beautiful thing.*" (#3) They stressed that marriage should be a committed relationship, characterized by respect between partners. Commitment was mentioned as effort from both partners and investment in the relationship in order to make it work. From this perspective, this participant commented:

> *My view is that it [marriage] is something that is a commitment. One that is very*
>
> *seriously, and one that, um you have to work at it, to make it work. It takes a lot of work,*
>
> *and I mean work in a sense of communicating with one another, um, seeing what the*
>
> *other person wants to be, being on the same page, or if you disagree, you know, be*
>
> *honest to, and so, that is why I said, work. (#5)*

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Most participants expressed their desire in finding someone to whom they could be committed and that they would commit to this person every day: "*I want to wake up every single day with this person and say I chose him and he chose me, and we are happy, and I would make this selection all over again.*"*(#1)*

When talking about what they envision in a marriage, besides of commitment, participants mentioned the desire for the spouse to be caring, romantic and to show respect:

I expect someone that he would, you know, listen to you, and listen to you. Someone that feels empathy when you are hurt, or like, sing me a love song once in a while, bring me a flower just for no reason, just because you love me, and tell me how I look pretty, you know, or I really love your hair. I am not talking about material things, because they mean nothing in the end, it is how you chose someone that loves you. (#2)

However, participants said that they have not met the man who could fulfill all of their expectations, partly due to participants' level of education, age, and being well-adapted as single women. Although having it clear what they expect from a husband and what they expect from marriage, these women pondered if they would choose to marry someone who does not fully meet their expectations in order to make their dream come true. This questioning is clear in this excerpt:

When you do [find a "good man"], are you willing to settle? That is the question that you have to ask yourself. Am I willing to settle for less? And that is, that is the question that you have to ask. Are you just willing to get married because you found someone with most of the qualities that you want and make it work? Or would you rather just be by yourself and just enjoy life as a single person, instead of just trying to find somebody that has some of the qualities? (#3)

All in all, the participants showed a positive notion about marriage. They presented clear expectations about what they seek in a committed relationship, however as they age, it seems that they might consider lowering their expectations in order to get married. Although seeing positive aspects related to being single, in the following I-poem the participant expressed her ambivalence about being single. While being independent seems to be a good thing, it is "sad" to be alone:

I can do anything
I want whenever
I want.
I don't have any children to look,
I don't have to,
I don't have to wash somebody's dirty clothes,
I don't have to do anything unless
I want to do it.
I love to cook,
I don't have anyone to cook for,
I don't have anybody to share my life with.
        And that is sad. (#2)

Influence of Family-of-Origin on Perception about Marriage

Participants' narrative about marriage and family life seemed greatly influenced by their previous experience with their family-of-origin. It should be noted that the voices of participants' mothers were particularly present in their discourse, especially when participants described what they expect (or not) from marriage.

The parents' influence was even present in one participant's refusal of marrying a man that proposed to her. Although hoping to be independent, this participant recognized that her parents', especially her mother's impressions, were fundamental in her decision:

I enjoyed talking with him, even then, I enjoyed talking to him, but I don't know. It may, it

may have something to do with, with my, my parents' interpretations of him. [laughs].

Even though I tried to be independent on my own person, but my mom, because he was,

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he was a little shorter than me, so my mom, my mom would say "he is short, he is short".

[laughs]. And, and, you know, you know, a man, it can be subconsciously, you get this

from your parents saying that if a person is shorter than me he is not good enough.(#6)

Notions of gender roles are implied in the above excerpt; however the participants' vision about gender roles for their marriage will be discussed later. In this section, the focus is on participants' perspectives of their family-of-origin. In this sense, it is clear that the parents' marriage set a tone for the participants' marriage, or for what they do not want for their future marriage. According to one participant, her role as a spouse was influenced by the way she was raised, especially in relation to how important it is to have a balance in household tasks:

They [her parents] didn't believe in allowances, but we had our chores, and my mother

would do the ironing, and she did most of the cooking, but he would, my father, he was

pretty good in cooking, himself. And I think we took turns cleaning, and she, that kind of

transferred over to my marriage. (#5)

While the marriage of this participant's parents portrayed a positive image of relationship and partners' interaction, other participants did not have a similar role model. Instead, the lessons some of the participants got from childhood were that women are supposed to take care of men, to cook and to clean. Although showing respect for their mothers, half of the participants stated that they do not want a similar marriage as their mothers had: "*It wouldn't be like my mom's. Because I, you know, I am not going to be the sole person in charge of everything.*"(#2)

Another strong influence of family-of-origin values on participants' perceptions of marriage and family life was the notion that marriage is supposed to last. Participants shared that they truly believe that marriage should be forever, and they got this message particularly from their mothers. Besides, they were told, mainly by their mothers, that they, as wives, need to do

their best to make the relationship work. However, half of the participants stated that there is an exception for the idea that marriage is for life: This happens when there is intimate partner violence. In this situation, it seemed that the lesson gathered from their mothers was that if the "wife's best" is not good enough for the husband, divorce is be accepted. The following passage illustrates one participant's mother's voice:

> *My mom, I always, she always told me that everybody, everyone needs a husband. She said "but you don't have a husband, if someone beat you, or you think they can beat you, humiliate you, or deprive you, then sometimes it is better to be by yourself because no one had to put up on that, that is not marriage is just about." And so, um, and she says pretty much "you should try your very best when you are married. Give your very best, but if your very best is not good enough and you don't get along, it is okay to, to leave it and go somewhere else." But she says "make sure you give your very best before you take off."(#3)*

Beside lessons about the role of a wife, the participants also presented perspectives about family life that was permeated by the discourse of their family-of-origin. As stated earlier in this chapter, the participants of this study defined themselves as strong women, as women that truly value family. Once again, the mother's voice was present in one participant's view about family:

> *I think sometimes, really, I think with family, you just have to agree or disagree some times. I think one of the things my mother always said with us growing up was that the world is hard enough, and so you know, as a family, you need to unite together and battle the world together. You may have conflict with your family but that should be internal conflict; that is not something you need to show everyone else what is going on. So it is like we have a united fount. And that's, and that's pretty strong word. (#1)*

Relationship with Family and Community

We have a very good relationship with each other. Um we look after at each other, we make sure that everybody you know, if somebody needs something, we can go to each other, one person cannot have it, then the other person might. We just have a good old fashioned fun: we laugh, we joke, we spend time with each other's children, we get to know them, and I just adore my family. (#3)

The sense of strong connection and support reflected above was clearly present when participants discussed the support gained from their family or from the community in helping raise their children. Some participants reported that they viewed their friends or people from church as their family in similar was as they viewed their interaction with family-of-origin. Overall, most of the participants described a strong connection with church community and friends. As expressed by one participant,

As far as being connected to my community, that is one of the reasons why I am still here, because I do have a connection to this community. It is not, um, you know, I don't feel even though I am away from my family, I don't feel totally alone when I am here. (#4)

All participants that were single or became single "again" when their children were still young reported high level of support either from their family-of-origin or from the community. Again, the mother or older women in the community played an important role in that process. Although hoping to see all of her daughters married, the mother of one participant was a great support for all of them. The notion that the women's role in a family is to keep members together and to give support is clear in this participant's description of the help she got from her mother: *"My mom quit her jobs so she could watch all of her grandkids. She would not let anybody else to watch her grandkids. And she would not take a penny from any of us." (#2)*

While getting help from their mothers in raising their children, at some point, two participants realized that they needed to be in charge of their role as a mother themselves. As stated in the following passage, after becoming more confident about her role as a mother, one participant perceived that her mother was having stronger influence on her son than she was. As a consequence, she felt the need of having a separation from her mother:

It was kind of, it was kind of weird because before it was really unsure as a parent and the more I became more solidified and became more assertive and sure, and just, you know, you become financially independent, then, all of a sudden, I come from this family, they were always great, always there for me, then it got to the point that I was, wait a minute, you are the grandmother, I am the mother and so we still have really some clutches on, you know, these were some of the things that I believed and I wanted to raise my son and her was well, "I raised three kids", you know, her being a mother. So I, I moved. (#1)

Besides of standing up for themselves as mothers, participants made sure to set limits with their families to protect their children. Although recognizing and valuing the support gained from family members, one participant was concerned about her daughter being raised in a violent environment. Trying to transmit a coherent message of love to her daughter, this participant set clear boundaries with family members:

Here is the deal, in my family, I told everyone: don't ever smack my child, don't ever smack my child. I am not raising my child as you raised me. I don't want my child to know, she experience any pain that she thinks love her, because to me it is not love when you smack a child, it hurts. (#2)

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Again, following the example of their mothers, participants indicated that they gave similar messages to their children about family life. Accordingly, their children should only conceive within a marriage. Nonetheless, if their children "choose" to conceive out of the wedlock, participants said that they would try to help raise their grandchildren, but they would no longer support their children financially:

My parents were there to give me that emotional support, and that advice, but financially, they were not, my mother, even with, um, as I went through, you know, dating, oh god, and trying to rebuild my life, my mother, my parents, would always, you made your choices, you know, you are out there, so financially, that is your decision supporting taking care of yourself is one thing, helping you taking care of your son, as he has needs, is another… Yeah, that was the message. I think, I think it was pretty cruel, I think at the time I thought it was pretty cruel, but I understood as we got on and I, I, and, and times by, I mean, I say the same things to my son. I say the same thing to him, I am like: "listen, I will help you to pay for, take care of your college education, and I am there, but at any point in time, you decide to be a single father, a single parent, you are on your own, kid. Like, I got my grandkid, but can't help you if you make poor decisions. (#1)

Besides concerns about their children becoming parents out of the wedlock, participants mentioned some lessons they have given to their children, and these seem to be in accordance with lessons gained from their family. The voice of one participant in her role as a mother is clear present in the following I-poem, as someone who is assertive in transmitting lessons to her children:

I always stress them that it is important to not get any children
I stress to them go to school and get your good education
I stress
I stress to them is that

find someone that is going to make you happy,
        or you want to be happy with, do not have any children out of a wedlock
I stress
        use condom and they use their brain
I stress
I stress to them
I also stress
        that make sure that whatever you do
I, I stress the importance of religion to them
I stress that it is important to have one religion
I believe,
        a lot of people, they commit suicide because they don't, they don't have anyone to
        turn to in their lives.
I stress that to them
        that it is important to have, a relation to God
 I stress to them
I stress that it is important to be able to save money.
I stress to them
I try, to treat people,
        to treat people the way you want to be treated
I tell them
I hope they are getting that. (#3)

It is important to note that the messages of other participants that are mothers were very similar to the one in the above I-poem. They emphasized the importance of getting higher education, making "good decisions", having a strong connection with church and being committed to the family. The following was presented by one participant as a clear intergeneration message:

I think one of the things I always say to him is one of the things my mom said to us, is that

family is family, you can agree or disagree, family is supposed to be united… I've told to

my son: You need to follow your dreams first, you need dreams, aspirations that you

have, you need to live, live that life first, and then when it is time to commit to a family,

you have to be, everything else is secondary." (#1)

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Role in the Family and Community

Along with the strong connection with family-of-origin, it is important to note that most participants described their role in their family, or even in the community, as caretakers. This position seemed to be associated with giving back the help once received, mainly in relation to raising their children. The voice of one participant as caretaker is highlighted in this I-poem:

> *I took care of her*
> > *my dad,*
> *I took care of him before they died*
> > *my grandmother,*
> *I took care of her,*
> > *and my aunt,*
> *I took care of her.*
> > *And that is why*
> *I say, now,*
> *I mean, if this is what*
> *I am going to do,*
> *I am going to do. (#2)*

Although stating that being a caretaker "wasn't good", this participant recognized that she needed to have a role in her family, especially because she would not allow her mother to take care of others after she became blind. Another participant also assumed the role in the family as caretaker because her mother was unable to perform this role due to her work schedule. The participant stated that helping her mother, mainly looking after her siblings, made her grow up faster. However, the participant considered that having the caretaker role did not affect her childhood, since she had the chance of being a child, when her mother was at home:

> *So I had to grew up, but I had a chance to be a child too. So, um, when my mom came mom, she took over all, all of that stuff that needed to be done and I would play, you know, like any other kid. But I had to do these, to do when my mom was at work, and I didn't mind to do those because I knew it would help my mom [pause] and my dad, and my brothers, and my sister. Somebody needed to take care of them. (#3)*

As indicated above, it seemed that the role as caretakers was influenced by the participants' connection with family and their sense of obligation to their families. In a similar vein, another participant described her role as caretaker for children at church emphasizing the fact that people from church can count on her for this role. Similar to the participant that helped her mother taking care of her siblings, this participant showed joy as caretaker. Note that in this passage the participant refers to the children at church as "when *we* have babies", connoting the fact that the church was her family. Again, the strong sense of community and connection with church are present in this participant's narrative:

> *I am like the church nanny, kind of. It is like when we have babies, little kids in our church, they always, I, if anybody in my church has a baby, I will probably be called to come Sunday morning. And so, and throughout the years, I have been the, you know, so throughout the years, every time there is a newborn, everyone knows that on Sunday morning, I am going to be the one. (#4)*

Besides the role of the caretaker, most participants mentioned their position as role model for younger generations, either within their families or members of their community. Participants were clearly proud about being a role model, especially in relation to their ability to transmit family values. According to one participant, by being supportive to younger family members, she is perpetuating the idea that family should be united:

> *I've tried to be there for my nieces and my nephew. I like to reach out for them, be helpful, be supportive, just as a leader, as a role model of some sense, of family, but also to instill in them a sense of proud and them to know that we are there for each other. (#1)*

Going beyond the family unit, in the context of community, the notion of being a role model was associated with participants' involvement in philanthropy and with their position of

mentors to students. This participant felt a sense of accountability towards her students, especially Blacks. In the following passage, she expresses her effort in encouraging students to believe that it is possible to be successful professionally and to also have a family:

I like being a role model for the Black men and women students… I know that [pause] I have a certain responsibility to those students because of the things they have said to me. I think they think that if you do what I do, it is hard to be married. I think some think that, that you can't... I know some Black women have said that I can't do that and have a family. And so you, your ability to move up or being in a career and having a family is very difficult. That disappoints me when they think that. And then they think that and believe that. And maybe not choose some careers because of that. (#6).

Personal achievements and life experiences also seemed to play a role in the participants' interactions with friends. As a role model to her friends, one participant noted that she emphasizes the need to know one's own needs and desires first before entering into a relationship. *"And the whole thing that I say, you know, you know, take care of yourself. I was honestly miserable in my second marriage and a lot of that had to do because I put myself second in so many places." (#1)*

Family and Community's Reaction to Singlehood

All participants reported a strong sense of family and acknowledged that their positive view of marriage derives mainly from family and community values. However, participants recognized that not being currently married is against their family's expectations. As stated by one participant, *"My mother, deep in her heart, she really wanted her daughters to be married, but she didn't get it." (#2)* Even though there is the notion that marriage is supposed to last, as discussed earlier, there is an exception for that rule, and that is when there is intimate partner

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violence. This participant indicated that, though in a violent marriage, at first she was considered staying married because of her concerns regarding her parents' reaction to the divorce. Nonetheless, similarly to most participants, she reported support from family members and/or friends to exit the relationship:

At first, I wouldn't get a divorce because I thought my parents would be disappointed at me. But I did call my dad and I told him what was going on and I got that: "don't worry about money, you get out right now." (#2)

In fact, when asked about messages that she has received from family or community in relation to her singlehood status, one participant reported feeling surprised by the lack of expectations. Even though surprised by the lack of messages, especially because the church values marriage, two participants mentioned that this lack of expectations could be a result of singlehood being so common within the church community. In regards to messages about her singlehood status, this one participant shared:

Um, surprisingly no. I met some people, they tried to fix me up, but you know, having no, not really. I feel the sense of freedom and that, um, and maybe because in my church we have some widows, we have divorced people, so, you know, we are pretty close to all of them, and married couples[pause] So, like they don't. I don't get any messages, I think they are not like "you should get married, you should be like this, or you should". (#5)

The absence of direct messages in relation to what the participants should do (or not) was shared by most participants. Some related this lack of direct messages to the fact that their friends also desired marriage while one participant in particular named this absence of messages and expectations as a sign of respect among her friends. She reported feeling comfortable because she does not feel judged by friends: *"I call it respect for each other, you know, this idea*

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that these friends are not judging me, being in a relationship or not being in a relationship, um,

so there is comfort in that." (#6)

According to half of the participants, although supportive, their family and/or community want to see them (re)married. In that sense, one participant mentioned that the support from family and from her friends would not happen in case if she was not interested about getting remarried. It is important to highlight that this participant stated that one of the reasons why she came back to Kansas after her divorce was because people from the Midwest shared her values about marriage and family life:

> *I don't think any of my friends really think much about it (her divorce), and I think that's*
>
> *because I am very open about the fact that I am willing to get remarried. I want to get*
>
> *remarried, I want, I think, so I think it makes they feel like okay, because this is what you*
>
> *are supposed to do, you know what I mean? So I think it makes them feel more*
>
> *comfortable. If I walk now saying that I want to be single, I don't think they will feel*
>
> *comfortable around me. (#1)*

Participants' community appears to have shifted from asking about marriage to motherhood. One participant that does not have children reported being asked when she was planning to start a family despite her single status. In that scenario, although expecting her to get married, being single did not appear to be the major concern for some members of the community:

> *I think it is odd, the question I get now is not when I am getting married, but I hear*
>
> *people saying "when are you going to have children?" And the first thing that I say is*
>
> *when I get a husband. And so, it is like I think that might be the thing that has changed in*
>
> *society whereas because it is so come to have it out of the gridlock, which again, got no*

problem with that, but it is just, I think it is so common that people forget about, you

know, typically, you have a husband and a wife and then you have children together. (#4)

Social and Cultural Influences on Perspective about Marriage

The influence of the participants' social and cultural contexts was clear in segments of their narratives about their lived experience of singlehood. Even when voices of the social and cultural discourses were not directly present in the participants' narrative, participants were very clear about their expectations either for themselves and/or for a romantic partner in regards to issues related to education, race, gender, religion, and geographical location.

Education

It was clear that all participants of this study valued education. Considering that most participants were mothers before acquiring higher education, it seemed that the goal of attaining higher education was postponed in lieu of starting a family. Of the six participants, five had completed masters or doctoral degrees while one was still pursuing her dual college/masters. The achievement of these participants was impressive considering that attaining higher education was not common in their families-of-origin, hence the subsequent lack of encouragement to pursue with higher education. Some of participants could recall clear parental messages about the importance of education. In the following passage, one participant quoted her father's message about her being independent. It is important to note that this participant considers her father was the major supporter of her getting higher education:

It is important for my father to say to me that "I don't want you to", interesting statement

though,"I don't want you to ever be dependent on a man. If you don't have a man, I want

you to be able to take care of yourself." (#6)

"Be able to take care of yourself" seemed to be a common message, reported by most participants. It appeared that participants interpreted this message as having to be financially independent and they believed that education was the route. In order to make this happen, participants were motivated to get a degree, and they strived through the challenges of either raising children as single parent while getting a degree, or being persistent in getting higher education in a context where there was not much support and encouragement for that.

Education seemed to have not only helped participants gain their independence, but allowed them to discover themselves. As described by one participant, this was a time of "sabbatical" from dating, by being solely focused on getting her degree and on her own needs. While only one participant referred to this stage as a sabbatical, other participants also stated that while getting a degree, they did not think much about marriage, but on themselves and the dream of getting (re)married was postponed to after graduation. The voice of one participant is highlighted in the following I-poem as someone who came to know more about her personal strengths after taking the "sabbatical":

> *I know my values*
> *I think that it is another reason why this sabbatical helped.*
> > *It is helping me because it reaffirms to me*
> *I, I, I am worth so much more.*
> *I think*
> *I will be really honest*
> *I think*
> *I have continued to multi-tasking, if*
> *I have continued*
> > *to try dating and working, and tried to go to school and all these things,*
> *I think*
> *I would have become,*
> *I would make some poor choices*
> *I am now*
> *I have the ability to just focus on myself*
> *I think*
> *I make better decisions. (#1)*

Thoughts about education were also present when participants talked about their expectations for a husband. Some participants clearly stated that they want a husband with the same level of education as them, whereas others said that education is not as important as having a job and not be dependent on the wife. One participant indicated that her concern is not about the husband's education, but his ability to represent them well in social settings:

> *I don't care if he is not educated, you know, if he only has a high school diploma or associate degree, that is fine with me... But I would, I would just him to be able to hold on his own in a social setting. You know, like if I am not standing there besides him and someone comes and starts a talk to him, it doesn't reflect negatively on me because of things that he says. (#4)*

Overall, the common theme in relation to expectations for a husband in regards to education was that regardless of education level, at least the husband should contribute to the household, and ideally, he will be the family's breadwinner. As stated by one participant: *"I need a husband who can pay for a maid." (#3)*

Gender

Most participants indicated that they were raised in a context where traditional gender roles were taught and expected within marriages. As described by one participant:

> *You have to as a woman in America, oh I shouldn't say a woman, I should say a Black woman. Um, we are taught to take care of our men, to cook for them, to clean for them, you know, to make sure dinner is on the table, and this, and I don't know if that is the way it is right now, but look, when I grew up, this was the way it was. (#2)*

Although most participants stated that they do not want to be in a similar position as their mothers were, participants that want to get (re)married indicated either a clear expectation of

traditional gender roles within marriage or have a rather romantic view of marriage, which seemed to be related to cultural messages about gender. As stated by one participant:

> *I would expect a lot of support, like I said, I am more traditional, so I like the idea, not necessary saying that the man is the head of the household, but I like the guy being the protector, and the provider. (#4)*

In addition, other participant indicated: *"I need him to treat me like a queen" (#3),* referring to a shared desire among her female friends of being the priority in their future husband's life. Being the "number one in his life", according to this participant, means that both the husband and the wife should be caring for and respectful of each other's needs.

Along with traditional notions of gender roles, participants also shared their perspectives about power in marriage. Those who addressed this topic seemed to consider that men are the ones who make the decisions in the family. Although one participant stated that power "should be equal;" she meant that the husband would communicate with the wife about decisions he has made for the family. Another participant stated that she was the one to give power to the man making her have the ultimate power. This idea of power in relationship is captured in this excerpt:

> *I think it needs to be the man. I think it needs to be, I think there are some decisions that need to be made jointly, but I think in the end, it needs, the man needs to be in charge. I think it needs to be that woman, the woman needs to be submissive and knowing that there are some things that he will ask you, and there are things that he is going to tell you... You, the woman, you make the ultimate decision. And what I mean by that is this, you chose this man. You chose him, so you made the ultimate decision. (#1)*

From this perspective, based on Gilligan's notion of contrapuntual voice, it could be said that some participants are facing the dilemma between two apparent controversial messages from their family and community: Be a Black woman means to be strong:

Black women are strong, a very, very strong women, and they are the people who have to keep families together. And that's, and I remember that is because I became a mom, and one of the things I think about Black women came from the standards that my mom said. (#3)

But it also means that when married, women should agree in having the men being the one making decisions:

When it comes to men, they want to make men decisions about certain things, and you, and they want to do the men things, and to make their decisions about certain things. But it is good for them to involve you in the decision-making, even though the ultimate decision might be theirs (#3).

Race

When talking about expectations for future husband, only one participant indicated that she only wants to marry a White man. She justifies her choice based on previous experience with Black men, and the fact that it is easier for her to find a White man who would meet her expectations. As a consequence, this participant made sure to make it clear that her choice for a White man is not a sign of betrayal to her culture, but more a result of shortage of eligible Black men:

I am Black and I am a proud Black woman. What I am saying is that, in the few times, in the times when I dated Black men and the, the chances of I see my, I see my friends who

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are waiting, still waiting for a Black man, I am smart enough that I am not going to sit

there and wait. (#1)

Other participants shared that they were fine marrying a man from another race, but they would prefer to marry a Black man, even though they acknowledged the shortage of eligible Black men. The reasoning for that preference seemed to be mainly due to the social context in which participants grew up. Participants mentioned that growing up in a segregated society made them interact more with Black men, so they are more "used to" being in a relationship with men of the same race. In fact, some participants reported that they have never dated a man outside of their race. Still others considered that men from other races would not know how to "deal" with Black women, especially because Black women are strong and independent:

I think that they [from other races] cannot deal with us being so strong, they cannot deal

with us having an opinion, they [men from other races] cannot deal with us being better

than they are. (#2)

Note that though "strong", "having an opinion", and "better" than men, these participants indicated that they expect men (namely Black) to be confident, to have power in the relationship and to protect women. Some of the participants referred to this as "swag". According to one participant, a man with swag is the one that, besides the ability to protect others, he facilitates the strength and confidence in a woman: *"It is because of him that she has that confidence to be who she is, and he, and the only way you can have it is two Black people. It doesn't come with Black and White." (#2)*

Religion

With the exception of one participant, participants of this study reported a strong connection with the Christian Church. As a result, they stated that their strength comes from their

faith. They mentioned that their faith has helped them strive through major difficulties, such as raising their children as a single parent and coping with death of a husband. As stated by one participant, her faith helped her deal better with the death of her husband, as well as feel comfortable with her current single status:

...my belief system and my faith, and God, like have trust in faith and in God. I do believe that. I wouldn't say this a few years ago, but now I am really coming to the realization. It is not because I have everything I want, that is for sure, but I just have this entitlement, and I do believe in prayer and, um, reading the scriptures and that helps me a lot.(#5).

Another important role that religion seemed to have in participants' life was in relation to the belief that God has a plan, and if the participant has not met her husband yet, it could be because it is not His plan. Regardless if participants had never married, was divorced, or is widowed, most felt certain that they will meet their husband, if it was meant to be -- if it is God's will.

Participants that were active in their Christian faith or church, expected to marry a man who was as active in his Christian faith. For one participant, this desire was presented in relation to the transmission of religious values to her children:

I am very, very much so involved, our church is very important to me, I want, I want to have a type of family that goes to church together and, um, you know, that, that will be a big part of our, you know, my kids, bringing, the way I relate. I don't want to be a family where I go to church and my husband doesn't and he doesn't care if the kids go or not. I want to be a combined effort of how we raise our kids, you know, believing in God (#4).

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Geographical Location

Participants indicated that their experience of singlehood had been markedly influenced by their geographical location. Considering that all participants of this study had lived in other areas of the U.S., it seemed that there were some particularities about being in the U.S. Midwest. The particularities about being in a U.S. Midwest town are mainly related to family and traditional values shared in this region. One participant shared that she decided to return to the Midwest after living in the East coast because she knew that Midwesterners valued families: "*The chance of me getting married living out there [East coast] is very slim, whereas in the Midwest, men are more susceptible, you know, this is marriage, and family, they believe on that.*" *(#1)*

Another participant compared the dating scene between the Midwest and Southern states noting that conservatism in the Midwest made it more challenging to date:

> *Being single in Manhattan, KS is totally different than being single in, in Atlanta, Georgia. Because I am quite sure if I was in Atlanta, Georgia, I would probably have all kinds of dates [laughs], they are different. There are so many places to go and the atmosphere of dating is probably totally different, less conservative to the atmosphere than dating here... So once you get to Atlanta and you get a bunch of ladies who date, then, your perception of dating probably will change, you know. There is okay to go out and have sex whenever you want to, you know, instead of being more conservative.(#3)*

Besides difficulties related to being in a more conservative region, participants indicated awareness of the shortage of eligible and available Black men. Participants noted that the "good Black men" were either already married or they are more interested in interracial marriage:: "*I*

just think we have a lot of men like that, but they are all taken, you know, and the ones there

aren't, they are not looking at us." (#2)

Life Satisfaction and Ambivalence about Marriage

Participants demonstrated a strong sense of self and hope in life. Although most participants indicated that they want to be married, not being currently married was not associated with sadness or frustration. Participants have found ways to cope with the challenges of singlehood, and for that reason, they feel strong, confident, and proud of themselves. Describing the present stage of life as "*the best time in my life" (#1),* one participant recognized that "even though" she has experienced multiple challenges in her life, she considers that she is a "better catch" now and she deserves everything as any other woman in regards to marriage. Her voice expressing maturity, freedom, and strength is captured in the following I-poem:

> *I feel like*
> *I feel like*
> > *even though*
> *I am older*
> > *even though*
> *I, you know*
> *I am a single parent,*
> > *even though*
> *I am all of this*
> *I still feel like*
> *I deserve everything*
> *I am not going to settle*
> *I am not going to settle*
> *I still deserve everything that someone would deserve for the first marriage*
> *I mean, it is still the same*
> *I think*
> *I think*
> *I am a better catch because*
> *I am older*
> *I am more experienced*
> *I am stable*
> *I just think that there are a lot of things*
> *…*

> *I am like*
>> *This is the best time in my life*
> *I see myself as no different than almost a Freshman in college*
> *I don't have kids*
> *I don't have those responsibilities*
> *I can do*
> *I can do*
> *I can go*
> *I am there*
> *I am there*
> *I am open to all of that. (#1)*

Participants further expressed their ambivalence about marriage. It appeared that their independence and ability to be single have made participants feel hesitant about being in a committed relationship. As described by one participant, some of the concerns seemed to be related to the anticipation of traditional gender roles in marriage, which could result in a loss of her autonomy:

> *When you, when you have been by yourself for a while, you are kind of settled in your ways … when I come home evening sometimes, I don't have to cook if I don't want to. There is no expectation for me to cook. I can put on my clothes, I can go to the gym, I can go to my friend's house, and stay, even spend a night if I want, and anybody has anything to say about it. Whereas if I had a husband, I couldn't have the freedom to do the things that I want to do. (#3)*

In order to manage feelings of loneliness while keeping their independence, three out of six participants indicated that they are open to dating. One participant specifically stated that she would like to date, but not have a committed relationship: *"I like the independence, I will be honest with you. It would be nice, I am looking for someone that I could just go out with, but I don't really want a long-term commitment at this point."* (#5)

Engagement in community organizations, close relationship with friends, and work commitments were other factors presented as contributors to the positive feelings in relation to their independence and singlehood status. Having these made one participant feel like she has *"quite a full life now" (#5),* and for her, marriage is something that *"if it happens, it happens…but I am not actively, 'oh I have to remarry.'" (#5).*

In a similar vein, although pondering if life would be different if she had married, another participant showed confidence in stating that being single has not restrained her from attaining success and being happy. For this participant, accomplishments and happiness is a matter of a choice*: "[marriage] didn't stop me from having a family, it didn't stop me from having a career, um, it hasn't stopped me from enjoying life. I, you know, I want to be happy. (#6)* In the following I-poem, this same participant's voice is highlighted as someone who has accomplished 'things' in life and is satisfied. As other participants, she has found satisfaction as a single woman:

> *I don't feel like*
> *I missed anything,*
> *I don't feel like my life would have been that,*
> > *that my life was bad because*
> *I didn't get married.*
> *I mean,*
> *I don't feel that right now.*
> > *Because*
> *I don't feel,*
> *I don't feel sad,*
> *I don't feel lonely,*
> *I don't feel like*
> *I miss anything. (#6)*

The singlehood status has not inhibited participants from achieving goals and having satisfaction in life. The connection with family members, friends and the community has helped them strive through challenges, especially those related to be single mothers. Participants showed

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high levels of resilience as they consider that they have achieved success in life despite all the challenges they have experienced. Although most participants indicated that they want and plan on being married, most of them seemed ambivalent about that. The ambivalence seemed to be related to the possibility of losing part of self when in marriage. The risk of losing part of self seemed to be a result of the possible presence of traditional gender roles within marriage, and that seemed to be frightening for some participants.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

The purpose of this study was to better understand how single Black women manage the tension between individuality and togetherness by exploring their lived experience of singlehood. Findings of this study support previous studies in that participants proudly defined themselves as strong and independent women (Burton & Tucker, 2009; Banks, 2011). Participants indicated receiving messages from their family, friends, community and the media that they needed to work hard, and not be dependent on a man. Despite these messages of independence and self-sufficiency, participants presented a positive view about marriage and for the most part, expressed a desire to be (re)married.

Based on the findings, it appears that the majority of participants present an "integrated self" whereby they show the capacity for interdependence; they present the ability of following their individual life goals while still strongly connected to their community (Knudson-Martin, 1996). This finding is contrary to the idea that women tend to operate a "connected self" whereby their identity is defined in terms of the family or community within which they are rooted. The maturity of participants may contribute to this more integrated self.

Participants reported overall professional success, satisfaction in life and strong connection with family and community. One important perspective inherited from the connection with family and community is a notion of gendered power imbalance in marriage. Research suggests that the oppression experienced in multiple aspects of their lives has contributed to Black men's resistance to egalitarianism in the home (Bryant, et al., 2010). It is observed that Black men seem to try to compensate the historical economic marginalization by trying to have more power in marriage. Considerate of their spouses' emasculation in society, Black women might have the tendency to accept and expect men to be the ultimate authority in the marriage

(Cowdery, et al., 2009; Gallagher, 2003). However, the adherence to family and community values that embraces gendered power imbalance in marriage may contribute to participants' ambivalence about marriage.

Despite their ambivalence, all but one participant stated that they plan on being (re)married. The ambivalence about marriage seems to be related to the possibility of losing part of the self. According to Knudson-Martin and Mahoney (1999; 2005), when in a relationship, partners bring their beliefs about self and others, which is markedly influenced by social and cultural contexts, especially in regards to notions of gender and power. Considering that participants present a rather gendered perspective of marriage, they may be pondering the potential risk of losing the self, or becoming less differentiated if they were to marry.

When describing what they expect from a spouse, participants indicated that they want respect. Based on their narrative about what they mean by respect, it appears that these women seek what the literature identifies as 'attunement' in relationships (Siegel, 2007). Participants reported wanting a husband who is sensitive to their needs. According to the literature, attunement is a process of being relationally present and able to open oneself to another's emotional experience (Siegel, 2007). Participants' descriptions of their expectations for a husband suggest the desire for attunement and connection. Most participants indicated being open and wishing for the relational strategies that research suggest are elements that can build attunement and connection: intentionality, continual communication, and partnership (Jonathan & Knudson-Martin, 2012). In their description of previous relationships that included partial communication, inconsistent decision-making and gendered power, it appears that participants' past relationships lacked attunement. Those past relationships are akin to the traditional gender

model, in which the woman did not have her voice or needs heard (Jonathan, & Knudson-Martin, 2012).

Despite previous negative experiences in relationships, some participants seem to gravitate towards adhering to cultural norms, implying tolerance with gendered power imbalance. This power imbalance however may be an obstacle towards attunement (Jonathan & Knudson-Martin, 2012). This dilemma is illustrative of when participants state that while they want respect and commitment within marriage, they also present with a patriarchal perspective of marriage, in which men are the ones who have the "ultimate decision". This dual perspective reflects current literature that highlights similar dualities regarding gender and family roles within Black families (Cowdery, et al., 2009). It is suggested that although considered overall equitable (Furdyna et al., 2008; Goodwin, 2003), Black couples present a strong ideology of traditional gender roles (Cowdery, et al., 2009; Furdyna et al., 2008).

The challenges that participants face in finding a male counterpart with similar levels of education and/or socio-economic status supports previous research (e.g., Torr, 2011; Wang, 2012). Though acknowledging the shortage of Black men, most participants indicated they would prefer to marry a man of their same race. Among those that would prefer to marry a Black man, some identified that this desire is particularly related to the fact that they expect a partner with "swag". As observed in the literature (Banks, 2011), some Black women prefer a male Black partner with swag because he has confidence, he has power, and with him, a Black woman can feel confident and protected.

Only one participant clearly expressed that she does not want to marry outside of her race and another wanted to only marry a White man. The former participant's preference reflects previous studies where Black women did not feel that men from other racial groups would know

how to appreciate and relate with them (Emery & White, 2006; Banks, 2011). Contrary to Banks (2011), though most participants showed a preference for a husband of the same race, all participants indicated that if they marry a man from another race, their family and community will be receptive.

Although preferring men with same level of education, participants indicated that they would marry someone with lower education level. This supports previous studies that suggest that Black women are the group of women that marry-down most frequently in the U.S. (Emery & White, 2006; Burton & Tucker, 2009; Banks, 2011). The marry-down may be a consequence of lower number of male counterparts with the same level of education, the women's preference of marrying someone from the same race and the desire to be married.

Another factor that was a pertinent in participants' lives is the existence of children. Although the literature indicates that Black women have the most unplanned pregnancies or out of the wedlock conceptions (Banks, 2011; Mather, 2010), participants that were mothers conceived while still married. Participants who had never been married either adopted a child, or are considering this possibility. The decision to adopt rather than wait for marriage supports previous findings that noted a higher rate of adoption among Black single women compared to other racial groups (The National Center for Health Statistics, 2008; Blake, 2009; Banks, 2011). The desire to raise children appears to be linked to the importance of passing along family and cultural values to the next generation. Values that were passed on included lessons of family planning, the importance of pursuing higher education, gaining independence, and having a strong sense of family. Based on the participants' descriptions of their own connection with family and community, these messages appear to be values that are transmitted

intergenerationally. The value of family solidarity or "pulling together" as family (Cowdery, et al., 2009) reflects the strong sense of familism known in Black families.

The support gained from family and community appears to be fundamental to participants' sense of self. Based on their narratives, it seems that the connection and support from family and friends allow participants to pursue their individual desires and life goals. However, the pursuit of individual goals are performed in tandem with due adherence to (extended) family obligations. This supports Knudson-Martin's (1996) reframed concept of differentiation. Accordingly, self-development happens through relationship with others; therefore self-development and relationship development are interdependent. As a result, differentiation is considered more complete when individuality or togetherness forces are integrated. Participants have clear plans about when they want to begin dating or enter a committed relationship; which is after achieving personal goals such as completing their higher education. So these women put off marriage and committed relationships in order to ensure that they achieve their professional goals. They are in no hurry -- denoting confidence in their ability to find a suitable mate and remain desirable to the opposite sex. It also reflects maturity -- not entering relationships for the sake of having a relationship. There is also more at stake -- their professional reputation, the well-being of their children and the independence that they have earned for themselves -- that needs to be factored into the relationship marriage equation.

Strengths and Limitations

The main strength of this study is that it provided an avenue for a group of Black single women to give voice to an experience that they had not had the opportunity to share. It further provides insight into an experience that is not well understood that can allow service providers to provide more informed treatment protocols.

It was not under the scope of this study to have a homogenous sample. Therefore, the inclusion criteria could potentially bring some limitation to this study, as participants only needed to self-identify as single Black/Black, middle-class, and have attained a college degree. Regardless of this potential limitation, the meaning and the essence of the lived experience of singlehood for the participants was captured by utilizing the voice-centered relational method (Gilligan, et al., 2003).

Implications for Future Research and Practice

Based on findings of this study, future research could consider focusing on a more homogenous sample, such as delimiting to only never-married or to only previously married participants, as previous marriage experience seem to influence participants' current perspective about marriage, as well as on their current experience of singlehood. On the same note, future research should also examine the experience of singlehood among single parents as this was another factor that influenced the experience of singlehood among the participants. Because some participants indicated that there are some particularities about being single in the U.S. Midwest, future research should consider broadening the understanding of this phenomenon based on the experience of women living in varies geographical areas.

Further, considering that five out of six participants were in the age range of 45 to 65 and these five participants appear to have higher/more integrated self, future studies should examine if age could be a factor that contributes to women's level of differentiation. Future study should also consider the impact of different levels of differentiation on perspectives of singlehood.

In regards to implications for practice, most participants indicated that helping professionals should not be biased when listening to the client's story. Considering the multitude of factors influencing the experience of singlehood among Black women, clinicians and family

services professionals should be open to listen carefully to each client's unique life story/experience. As stated by one participant, clinicians should:

> *Listen. Listen and be able to separate yourself and your values from the values of the individual, because one thing that gives me the most is that a lot of times people, what they perceive as one thing is totally different than what somebody else perceives. (#3)*

Singlehood can be a choice, as indicated by participants. Therefore, based on the participants' narrative, therapists should not question the clients' decision, but better help them follow their own voice in the process of making this decision. Beyond following participants' suggestions of listening carefully to the client's history and cultural values, therapists should also consider the possibility of addressing gendered power issues both in individual and couple therapy. In both scenarios, therapists should try to challenge clients to review gender stereotypes and make decisions about how it could be possible for them to develop a more/higher integrated self (Jonathan, & Knudson-Martin, 2012). It would also be important for professionals to understand that Black women's experience of singlehood may include adhering to cultural values that embrace gendered power imbalance and familism that challenges women's ability to fully embrace individualism – a societal expectation of single and independent individuals. The ability to process this dilemma would be important for clients to better manage their single status and contemplation/plans for marriage.

Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that it is indeed possible to be satisfied with life as a single Black woman. One of the most challenging difficulties for participants is their role as a single parent, which has profound impact on participants' experience of singlehood. It appears that the perception of what it is to be a Black woman, inherited from interactions with other

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Black women as well as transmitted from previous generations played a fundamental role in participants' process of differentiation. Participants were proud to be Black and stated that they adhered to the expectations of them as Black women, which includes being "strong", holding family together, and transmitting family values to their children.

Most participants were previously married and reported having no examples of women in what they would consider a "good marriage". Nonetheless, participants showed a positive perspective about marriage, and most of them stated they want to be (re)married. However, while identifying themselves as "strong, independent" women, and confident about what they want out of marriage, especially in regards to commitment, partnership, and attunement, participants seemed ambivalent about being (re)married. This ambivalence seemed related to the likelihood of traditional gendered power imbalance in/within marriage, which concerns them. In the meantime, participants' strong social and family connection appears to help sustain them and offer fulfillment and purpose in life.

All in all, findings of this study suggest that the integrated self seems to be a process. Participants appear to be continually challenged by the pull between keeping their independence and the need to be connected romantically that may call for giving up some independence, especially in regards to decision making and power in relationship. Hence, the integrated self appears to be not a point of arrival but a process that demands continuous time, effort and discernment.

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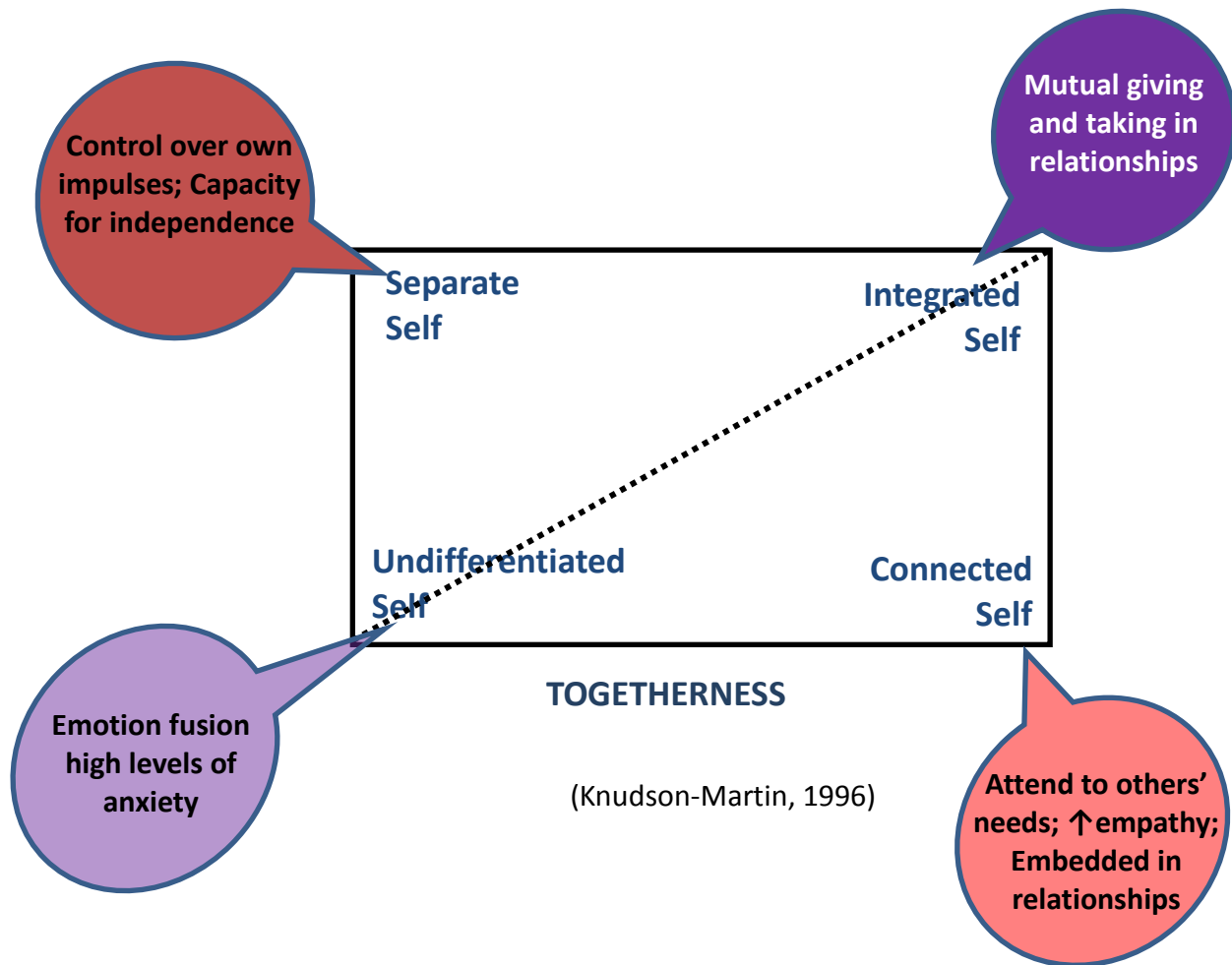
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Appendix A - Reframed Concept of Differentiation

Control over own impulses; Capacity for independence

Mutual giving and taking in relationships

Separate Self

Integrated Self

Undifferentiated Self

Connected Self

Emotion fusion high levels of anxiety

Attend to others' needs; ↑empathy; Embedded in relationships

TOGETHERNESS

(Knudson-Martin, 1996)

Appendix B - Interview Guide

*Demographics

1. Age:_____

2. Current relationship status:

☐ Single, never married

☐ Single, in a committed relationship   ☐ Single, widowed (no. of years since

☐ Single, divorced (no. of years since   widowed: _____)

divorced: _____)   ☐ Single, other:

☐ Single, separated (no of years since

separated: _____)   _____

3. Number of children: Biological: _____

Adopted: _____

4. Sexual orientation:

☐ Heterosexual   ☐ Bisexual

☐ Same sex   ☐ Other: _____

5. Education level:

☐ Completed some college   ☐ Completed graduate education

☐ Completed college   ☐ Other: _____

☐ Completed some graduate education

6. Current employment status

☐ Working, full-time

☐ Working, part-time

☐ Unemployed

☐ On disability

☐ Other: _____

7. Family of origin:

        Number of siblings: _____ female; _____ male

        Sibling position: _____ (e.g., first born etc).

        Number of siblings currently married: _____ female; _____ male

Parental/guardian household: Who was/were your guardian growing up?

- ☐ Mother and father
- ☐ Mother and stepfather
- ☐ Mother, only
- ☐ Father and stepfather
- ☐ Father, only
- ☐ Grandmother and grandfather
- ☐ Grandmother, only
- ☐ Grandfather, only
- ☐ Other: _____

*Identity

1) What does it mean to you to be Black/African American?

2) Can you describe life as a middle class citizen?

*Singlehood

- If married before:

3) What was your previous marriage/relationship like?

3.1) How long was that for?

3.2) To what extent did it influence your current status as a single person?

4) What is it like to be single?

4.1) What does it mean to be single?

4.2) What are the advantages of being single?

4.3)What are the challenges of being single?

5) To what extent is singlehood a choice?

6) Did you always plan to be single?

      9.1) If yes: What contributed to that decision?

      9.2.) If no: What are some of the things that informed that change?

*Marriage

10) What are your views of marriage?

      10.1) What would you expect from a spouse?

10.2) How would you envision yourself as a spouse?

10.3) What would be your role be as a spouse?

11) What are your views about interracial marriages?

12) What are your views about marrying a man with less education than you?

13) What are your views about marrying a man who earns less than you?

*Family/community

14) What is your role in your family of origin?

      14.1) Are you responsible for taking care of your parents/grandparents? If yes, how is that for you?

      14.2) Are you responsible for taking care of your nieces/nephews? If yes, how is that for you?

15) How connected do you feel to your family/community?

16) How would you describe your social networks with friends and the community?

17) How connected do you feel to your culture and to your cultural values?

18) How have your family, community, and culture impacted your perspective about marriage?

19) What messages have you received, since childhood, about singlehood?

20) How have your family, community, and culture impacted your perspective about singlehood?

21) What messages have you received, since childhood, about marriage?

21.1) Are these messages different depending on the race of the man? If yes, how are they different?

22) What are the expectations of your family/community about marriage?

23) How have your family and community responded to your singlehood?

24.1) What kind of support have you received from your family and community in relation to your singlehood?

24.2) Is there any expectations from your family and community for you to get married?

25) Overall, how do you deal with your family and community's expectations in regards to your relationship status?

25.1) Has it changed over time? If so, what has contributed to that change?

26.2) How do you feel about the change?

27) How would your family and community react if you married a man from another racial group?

27.1) What if it was a man with a different religious background?

27.2) What if it was a man from a different SES?

27.3) What if it was a man with a different education level?

*Children

29) If participant has no children:

29.1) What are your views about starting a family?

29.2) Are there any expectations from your family and community for you to have children?

29.2) Would you consider adopting?

29.3) Would you consider having your own child as a single person?

29.3.1) If yes: How do you think your family and community would respond to your decision?

30) If participant has children:

      30.1) If adopted: How did you make the decision to adopt a child?

30.1.1) Who was there for you during the process?

      30.2) What is it like to raise children as a single parent?

      30.3) How has your family/community responded to you having a child as a single

person?

      30.4) What are some of the challenges of raising your child as a single parent?

      30.5) What are some of the advantages of raising your child as a single parent?

      30.6) How do your children respond to being raised by a single parent?

      30.7) What support do you get from your family in raising your child/ren?

      30.8) What sort of conversation do you have with your children about family life?

* Final Questions

31) What are some concerns you have for your future as a single Black/African American person that a married person may not (e.g. health care, financial support, leaving a legacy etc.)?

32) What advice would you have for other Black/African American women that are single?

33) What advice would you want from a Marriage and Family Therapist?

34) What advice would you give to a Marriage and Family Therapist?

35) Would the race of the therapist matter?

36) Is there anything that you want to add to today's interview that I have not covered?

Thank you for your participation. Will it be okay if I contacted you if I had more questions or needed to clarify anything from today's interview?