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The character of womanhood: How African American women's perceptions of womanhood influence marriage and motherhood

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Abstract

This qualitative paper will focus on how black women understand and perceive womanhood, and will explore how black women's perceptions regarding womanhood shape their attitudes and behaviours toward marriage and motherhood. Using a black feminist approach, I assert that black women's perceptions of womanhood are not based on European notions as the family structure and experiences of African American women is characteristically different from that of white women. Further, I assert that African American women create a modified version of womanhood based on their education, social class and economic position in relation to black men, and which may, in turn, inform their decisions regarding marriage and motherhood. Specifically, I examine the written responses of fifteen African American women between the ages of 18 and 55 (mean age of 32.6 years) regarding what is expected of them as women. Qualitative analyses of the data revealed that womanhood was defined in terms of *feminine attitudes* (strength, sensitivity and sensuality) and *feminine behaviours* (familial care, their own physical appearance and self-respect). In addition, womanhood was demonstrated through a woman's ability to care for her home and to take the lead in the absence of male leadership. Supporting qualitative data are presented in connection with each theme. Recommendations for future research are also provided.

Keywords

African American, black, black feminism, femininity, marriage, motherhood, womanhood

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The true worth of a race must be measured by the character of its womanhood.
Mary McLeod Bethune (1933)

Introduction

The historical and contemporary experiences of the African American family have inevitably been influenced by the choices made by black women, specifically those linked to attitudes and behaviours regarding womanhood. In fact, so important is the demonstration of womanhood that over 75 years ago, the renowned African American educator, Mary McLeod Bethune (1875–1955), asserted that the value of the black race is directly linked to how black women demonstrate womanhood. Given the numerous, multifaceted and complex relationships in their lives, black women, like women of other racial and/or ethnic groups, must negotiate what is expected of them, what they expect from themselves, as well as what they expect from others. Perhaps in no other realms have the decisions made by African American women had the greatest impact on the national interest in the state of the black family than those related to marriage and motherhood. This qualitative paper will focus on how black women understand and perceive womanhood, and explore how black women's perceptions regarding womanhood shape their attitudes and behaviours toward marriage and motherhood.

Significance of the study

This study is significant because, to my knowledge, very few studies have *qualitatively* examined how African American women define and demonstrate womanhood within the context of marriage and motherhood. This study will contribute to the scholarly literature by revealing the factors that may influence the choices that black women make regarding marriage and motherhood. Further, this study recognizes that black women are not members of a homogenous group and it does not assume that these women would provide either similar or divergent responses. Rather, this study is sensitive to variations in the responses, and most important the experiences among these women by validating the views of women from a relatively large age span. In addition, this study focuses on the developmental stage when most African American women desire a romantic relationship, marry (remarry) and/or become mothers (Taylor et al., 1997). Hence, this study will examine African American relationships among individuals who are between the ages of 18 and 55.

Three fundamental questions will be addressed: (1) How do African American women define womanhood? (2) How do African American women practice womanhood? (3) How do African American women understand and perceive womanhood, and how might these ideas influence the choices that they make regarding marriage and motherhood? Responses to these fundamental questions will be made

possible through an analysis of African American women's written narrative responses to these questions. Before this is accomplished, however, the following sections will focus on the attitudes and experiences of black women within the social contexts of marriage and motherhood in the African American community.

Review of the literature

Marriage

The societal decrease in marriage rates and increase in non-marital childrearing has become an issue of national concern in the USA. Since the institution of the Welfare Reform Law of 1996, various national, state and local programmes have been created to encourage marriage, particularly among low-income, African American cohabitating couples with children. An increase in the number of initiatives to encourage marriage among members of this population has been in response to statistics that reveal that when compared with whites (62 per cent) and Hispanics (60 per cent), the marriage rate among African Americans is the lowest (41 per cent) (Graefe and Kichter, 2002). Although a proliferation of research has highlighted discrepancies in marriage rates among blacks and members of other racial and ethnic groups, interestingly, the majority of African American women and men desire marriage.

Over ten years ago, Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan (1995) found that 81.3 per cent of single African American males and 72.4 per cent of single African American females hoped to marry one day. A recent dissertation by Chaney (2006) revealed that 90 per cent of cohabiting African American men and women hoped to marry one day. Given their desire for marriage, however, 42 per cent of black women and 45 per cent of black men have never married, and even when they do, black couples get married later in life, experience marriages that are of a shorter duration, have a higher likelihood of divorce and are less likely to remarry after divorce than whites (Cherlin, 1992; Glick and Sung-Ling, 1987). The most common scholarly theories related to declining rates of marriage among African Americans have attributed this trend to imbalances between the number of marriageable black men and women; the increased number of black men who marry non-black women (Crowder and Tolnay, 2000; Darity and Myers, 1995); the declining economic condition of black males (coupled with the increased economic status of black women); and cultural-value shifts related to family formation (Taylor et al., 1997). Even the popular media advances the view that the domineering nature of black women themselves may be largely to blame for their own low rates of marriage (Craig-Henderson, 2006; Jones, 2006; McMillan, 1992).

Although past studies have solely focused on demographic trends related to decreased marriage among African American trends, very little is known about how female African Americans see themselves as women. An understanding of how black women define and experience womanhood can reveal the expectations that black women have for themselves and their marriage and/or potential marriage

partners. Since lower rates of African American marriage have been regarded as being especially problematic for African American children, attention will now be given to the second theme in which this study is embedded: womanhood within the context of motherhood among African American women.

Motherhood

Over forty years ago, the rise in numbers of Black single mothers became an interest of national concern when Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1965) published what has now been commonly referred to as *The Moynihan Report*. In this report, Moynihan asserted that the black matriarchy was the primary distinction between black and white families, and the reason why black females in particular tend to have greater success in life. In spite of this seemingly positive outcome for black motherhood, many scholars, demographers and policymakers have noted a substantial decrease in the number of African American children who live in two-parent homes. According to the US Census Bureau (2005), only 33.1 per cent of black children live with both parents, compared with 75.9 per cent of white children and 66.3 per cent of Hispanic children. This phenomenon has gained a great deal of national attention because African American children born in single-parent households have a higher likelihood of living below the poverty level, residing in a dilapidated home, living doubled-up with other family members, not completing high school and becoming teen parents themselves (McMillan, 1992). As with discrepancies in marriage between African Americans and members of other racial and/or ethnic groups, several views have been advanced to explain the trend of increased single-parent child-rearing among African American women. Some researchers suggest that societal acceptance of cohabitation has been greatly responsible for many black women creating alternative family arrangements, which are not traditionally predicated on marriage (Smock and Gupta, 2002; Bumpass et al., 1991), while other researchers attribute these trends to the increased educational opportunities and economic independence of black women (Becker, 1971; McLanahan and Casper, 1995). While the primary goal of policy is to change the structure of low-income African American families, governmental initiatives generally fail to acknowledge the inherent connection between black womanhood and motherhood.

In *Black Intimacies: A Gender Perspective on Families and Relationships*, Shirley A. Hill (2005) makes the connection between womanhood and motherhood, especially among women who are not economically advantaged. When discussing the importance of motherhood for these women, Hill wrote the following:

Poor women of color often have few sources of hope or fulfillment in their lives, but the oppression they experience usually does not deprive them of their procreative abilities, and pregnancy and giving birth are profoundly powerful acts. Moreover, motherhood is a significant marker of womanhood. It provides a respectable social identity, an important set of child-rearing tasks, access to kin networks, and a space where authority, a sense of control, and self-expression can be cultivated.

Thus, childrearing and motherhood loom large as sources of gratification among poor and less advantaged women, even when it is not always planned or intentional. (Hill, 2005: 120)

Although motherhood is a historically important demonstration of black womanhood, very few studies have examined how African American women define and practice their roles, nor do we understand how black women's views regarding womanhood shape their attitudes and behaviours toward motherhood. Since perceptions regarding womanhood can directly influence the choices that African American women make regarding marriage and motherhood, this topic is a worthwhile area of study. Although various characteristics of womanhood have been advanced in the popular culture (Craig-Henderson, 2006; Jones, 2006; McMillan, 1992), an examination of the various ways that this construct has been examined in past literature is necessary. Specifically, this examination will focus on the general definition and demonstration of womanhood, as well as on how a black feminist framework fits into this analysis.

The definition of womanhood. The majority of scholarship devoted to how womanhood is defined has primarily done so through the lens of femininity, or what is commonly referred to as hegemonic femininity. Under 'hegemony', members of a particular social group or class mirror the views that are most prevalent in society (Connell, 2002; Dyer, 1993), and 'femininity' is a socially constructed standard for women's appearance, demeanor and values' (Bordo, 1993: 316). Taken together, hegemonic femininity necessitates that women, individually and collectively, support men's dominant place in society by being nurturing, emotional, caring and, most of all, physically attractive. Essentially, hegemonic femininity focuses on how women look as they navigate the world as partners, wives and mothers. Although Robert Connell (2002) believed that the ascendant position of men in society makes true hegemonic femininity impossible, it could hardly be argued that manhood cannot exist without its well-defined counterpart, womanhood. Although European notions of hegemonic femininity, or womanhood, promote the thin and toned female form as the ideal, several studies have noted that African American women do not necessarily subscribe to this particular standard of physical womanhood. For example, Stevens et al. (1994) found that African American women who are obese are less concerned about weight than white women. This finding was later supported by Hebl and Heatherton (1998), who revealed black women to be more satisfied with their weight and to view larger women as attractive in relation to white women.

In a departure from contemporary notions regarding how black women physically perceive themselves in relation to white women, recent works have focused on the historicity or the development of black womanhood. In *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Novelist*, Hazel V. Carby (1987: 6) asserts that African American female orators and published authors 'had to confront the dominant ideologies and literary conventions of womanhood

which excluded them from the definition “woman”. Even though black womanhood has been introduced into contemporary feminist discourse, other scholars are challenging stereotypical images of black womanhood.

In a recent work regarding black womanhood, Woodard and Mastin (2005) conducted a content analysis to determine whether *Essence Magazine* (see References) supports or eradicates four of the most common stereotypical descriptors of black womanhood, namely the: (1) mammy; (2) matriarch; (3) sexual siren; or (4) the welfare mother, or queen. The marriage and motherhood experiences of black women are not shared by members of the dominant culture, therefore this study will focus on black womanhood within the domains of marriage and motherhood. In addition to acknowledging the differential experiences of black and white women, other studies have defined womanhood in terms of a female's personality and her ability to bear children, as well as the social and/or occupational roles that she possesses, such as that of companion, wife, mother or employee (Constantinople, 2005), which leads on to how womanhood is demonstrated.

The demonstration of womanhood. Although Western notions of femininity primarily concentrate on how women look, this discourse also includes societal notions regarding how women should think and behave. Over forty years ago, Abbott (1969) associated womanhood with the ability of females to be: (1) self-concerned and timid; (2) insecure and dependent; and (3) considerate of others. In her groundbreaking work regarding students' perceptions of the characteristics associated with womanhood, Chavetz (1978) highlighted several gender-role stereotypes that are typically associated with this term. In general, males demonstrate manhood by being ‘athletic’, ‘unemotional’, ‘logical’ and ‘dominating’, while women demonstrate womanhood by being ‘weak’, ‘domestic’, ‘emotional’ and ‘dependent’. Interestingly, more recent work in this area found cross-cultural similarities between how manhood and womanhood are demonstrated. In their cross-cultural examination regarding the demonstration of womanhood in 25 countries, Williams and Best (1990) found ‘adventurous’ and ‘forceful’ as traits associated with being a man (manhood), while ‘sentimental’ and ‘submissive’ were characteristics associated with being a woman (womanhood).

In a Gallup poll conducted by Newport (2001) several years ago, ‘aggressive’, ‘courageous’, ‘ambitious’ and ‘easygoing’ were all used to demonstrate manhood, while ‘emotional’, ‘talkative’, ‘affectionate’, ‘patient’ and ‘creative’ were traits associated with womanhood. Other studies have defined womanhood in terms of the ability of females to provide for their own needs, specifically in regards to personal responsibility for their independence, self-reliance and agency (Emerson, 2002). One study in particular focuses on the demonstration of womanhood among African American women. In her qualitative study regarding the ways that black women demonstrate ‘strong black womanhood’ in spite of their subordinated social status, Beauboeuf (2005) found prescriptive and descriptive strength to be the greatest forms of strength in the lives of black women. In terms of how black women demonstrate womanhood, prescriptive strength highlights the ability of African

American women to be selfless – to put the needs of others before their own. On the other hand, descriptive strength views black women as human, with complementary, rather than mutually exclusive emotional states and needs. For the most part, scholarship devoted to understanding the definition of womanhood has concentrated on inherent, yet mutually supportive characteristics between men and women.

Black feminist perspective. During the 1970s, a burgeoning amount of black research began to challenge dominant notions of womanhood by specifically focusing on the experiences of black women. Black scholars, most notably Patricia Hill Collins, Bonnie Thornton Dill, Shirley A. Hill, bell hooks, Evelyn M. Simien and Valetia Watkins-Beatty, have been especially instrumental in examining the perspectives of black womanhood from a feminist perspective. Through the lens of feminism, these scholars asserted that race, ethnicity, sexuality and class work together to influence women's social worlds. Essentially, these scholars advanced a revised analysis of womanhood that is not based on the experiences of white women or viewed as a static and universal experience. In one of the first African American academic enterprises that examined black womanhood from an economic perspective, Dill (1979, 1983) asserts that black women's participation in the labour force is historically, motivationally and intrinsically different from that of her white 'sisters'. Although this was not the focus of Dill's work, this academician was one of the first to infer that future studies explore the experiences of black women, instead of solely relying on the commentary of white scholars who typically misinterpret black experiences due to their disregarding the personal, historical and familial experiences of African American women.

In *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins (1990) asserted that race, class, gender and sexuality are interconnected while the mobility of black women has been largely restricted by external definitions of what it means to be a black woman in America. In addition, this scholar asserted that the marginalization of black women necessitated that these women create a self-defined worldview that would ultimately validate their experiences. As a result, many African American women find a great deal of satisfaction in their familial roles, especially of those as partners, wives and mothers.

In her later examination regarding how heterosexual African American women balance work and family roles, Collins (1994) revealed motherhood to be a social construction that varies among different groups of women. As a result of this reality, this scholar asserted that one must question whether white middle-class models of motherhood should be regarded as the universal standard by which all other races or ethnic group experiences are to be evaluated. Inherently, black feminist thought has as its primary goal making the experiences of black women visible through validation.

In 'Gender differences in attitudes toward black feminism among African Americans', Simien (2004) places the contemporary experiences of black women in a historical context. After describing how African American women are more likely to be heads of their households and exert more parental and conjugal

influence in their homes than white women, this author highlights the point that black women are 'doubly bound' (Gay and Tate, 1998) in that their own goals as women may be trumped by members of their own race and those of the larger community. In effect, the education, social class and economic constraints experienced by a black woman's people necessitates that black women create a modified version of womanhood that influences how African American women perceive and make sense of their roles.

Other feminist scholars have focused on the role of marriage in regard to womanhood. In *Black Intimacies: A Gender Perspective on Families and Relationships*, Hill (2005) posits economic strain and female independence to be the primary reasons why African Americans do not 'reap the usual benefits of marriage – that is, household authority and exemption from domestic work for men and economic solvency and the ability to engage in full-time domesticity for women' (ibid.: 106). Although this idealized version of marriage has the male as the breadwinner and the female as the homemaker, such has not been the historical reality of African Americans (Billingsley, 1968; Dickerson, 1995; Frazier, 1939; Gutman, 1976; Hill, 2005; Taylor et al., 1997). Therefore, in relation to marriage, perhaps one of the greatest challenges to establishing stable black marital relationships is the inability of African Americans to resolve tensions between inherent cultural values and those of the dominant culture. As stated previously, the educational status and economic stability of black women may make their romantic partnerships with black men problematic because society situates 'manhood' within the context of 'aggressors, protectors and providers' for women and their families. Although independent, black women may desire black men (or men in general) to demonstrate symbols of 'manhood' that are consistent with, and highly regarded by, the white culture, yet may find themselves in romantic partnerships with black men who have not or cannot successfully meet those societal standards, or markers of manhood.

For all intents and purposes, the aforementioned sections affirm several realities regarding African American womanhood within the context of this particular discussion. First, the social standing of black women (e.g. education and finances) may inform how they define and demonstrate African American womanhood. Second, research regarding black womanhood must situate black women at the centre of their experiences in order to uncover what Simien (2004) refers to as 'the silent minority', specifically African American women. Third, since their personal, historical and familial experiences are different, the marriage and motherhood experiences of African-American and white women cannot be viewed as similar or static.

Method

The present study

This qualitative study has three major goals. First, it aims to identify definitions of womanhood that are privileged by a particular subset of the African American

community: African American women. Second, this study seeks to identify the demonstrations of womanhood provided by this specific group of women. Last, this study attempts to explain how this unique group of African American women's perceptions regarding womanhood may influence their decisions regarding marriage and motherhood.

This study's focus on African American women is deliberate. Past research has consistently shown that there is a prevailing stereotype among members of the lay and academic communities that African American women, as a group, are overly assertive, independent and difficult to get along with, essentially 'overbearing, attitudinal, and most notoriously, the Queens of Mean'. Unfortunately, current perspectives on African American marriage and motherhood provide sweeping generalizations regarding the attitudes and actions of African American women without allowing these women to provide their own narratives regarding how they should look or what is expected of them as women. An understanding of how black women define and conceptualize 'womanhood' is critical to understanding how these women see themselves in relation to their privatized and social worlds of marriage and motherhood.

Participants

Fifteen African American women from the states of Louisiana, Illinois and Tennessee participated in the study, and ten participants represented the state of Louisiana. Demographic information included age, education, marital/parental status, income, occupation and city/state. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 55 years. The mean age was 32.6 years. The average amount of time spent in education was 15.03 years. Six women had a high school diploma, three women were college graduates, four women were college students and two women were graduate students. Eight women were single/never married, four were divorced, and three were married. Although five women did not have children, ten had at least one child between the ages of 2 and 18 years of age. The participants had a median income that fell in the \$25,999–\$35,999 range.

Participants were recruited through a public announcement made during the Health and Human Services (HHS) Fatherhood Initiative Conference in 2003. The participants were advised that I was interested in their views regarding what is expected of them as women as this knowledge could shed light on the decisions that African American women make regarding marriage and motherhood, more broadly. The participants completed the survey anonymously and their identity is protected through the use of pseudonyms.

Research design

This study used a qualitative approach and examined the contextual themes present in the narrative responses. Participants completed an open-ended survey, which allowed them to provide written responses regarding how they personally define

and experience womanhood. To identify themes present in the written narratives, the responses were content analysed using an open-coding process (Holsti, 1969; Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Taylor and Bogdan, 1998). In keeping with open-coding techniques, no a priori categories were imposed on the narrative data which allowed themes to be identified from the narratives. In order to identify clearly these themes, words and phrases were the units of analysis. Specifically, coding involved examining all responses, keeping track of emerging themes, assigning words to each coding category, and examining how the themes presented were directly related to the definition and demonstration of womanhood. In addition, after all the responses were entered into a Word file, the themes were developed, expanded, refined and combined. For example, the definitions of womanhood were originally distinct categories, and were based on whether the response was associated with an *attitude* (strength, sensitivity and sensuality) or a *behaviour* (familial care, physical appearance and self-respect). To control for the 'length and stylistic complexity' of written responses, raters coded only for the 'presence or absence of endorsement' of particular categories (Mattis, 2000). Since previous research has revealed that black women's attitudes *and* behaviours directly influence their romantic life choices (Johnson et al., 1992), the decision was made to combine these separate themes as one distinct category. Furthermore, since previous scholars have highlighted the historical realities of black women as they balance expectations for themselves, their homes and their work lives (Jones, 2010), the demonstration of womanhood was based on the dual roles of domesticity *and* leadership.

In order to assess the reliability of the coding system, a list of all codes and their definitions along with a written narrative were given to an outside coder who was skilled in qualitative methods, who then coded the narrative based on this predetermined list of codes. The outside coder was selected due to their extensive experience with coding and analysing narrative data. This strategy allowed for a qualitative version of inter-rater reliability in that only core themes/concepts that: (1) were identified by both coders; (2) occurred in the majority of the participants' interviews; and (3) were salient, are included in this paper. After a 98 per cent coding reliability rate was established between the researcher and the outside coder, it was determined that a working coding system had been established. In order to control sufficiently for reliability, a second outside coder was selected to code and analyse the narrative data after the initial coding reliability had been established. The mean inter-rater agreement for the second coder was 95 per cent. I believe that this approach promotes overall rigor, reliability and validity of the qualitative findings that are highlighted in this study and greatly minimizes the likelihood that the researcher's biases heavily influenced the reported outcomes in this study.

Findings

In the subsequent paragraphs of this paper, I highlight two primary themes that were elicited from the written narratives: (1) the definition of

womanhood – womanhood as defined by feminine attitudes and behaviours; and (2) the demonstration of womanhood – womanhood demonstrated through domestic leadership. While spatial constraints did not allow much depth, the narratives that were selected best supported the primary questions of interest. Further, supporting qualitative data will be provided for each of the aforementioned themes.

Research question 1: How do African American women define womanhood?

Theme 1: The definition of womanhood – womanhood as defined by feminine attitudes and behaviours. Although two women described womanhood in terms of comprehensive development (e.g. ‘The transitional life stage from being a girl/child to an adult’ and ‘Womanhood is the point and time in a female’s life when she is a complete adult ... physically mature. The age would start at 22 and older’), most of the participants believed that womanhood embodied feminine attitudes and behaviours. Specifically, feminine attitudes combined strength, sensitivity and sensuality and feminine behaviours were a mix of familial care, their own physical appearance and self-respect. To illustrate, when speaking about the feminine aspects of womanhood, Maya, an 18-year-old single student, shared the following:

A woman is also strong and sensitive. A woman is bold and loving. Women are very sensual.

In support of Maya’s comment, Sonia, an 18-year-old single student, highlighted womanhood as ‘strength’. Interestingly, she also hinted at the possible reasons why black male–female romantic partnerships may experience strain. She wrote:

Womanhood is much harder. Our competition with men makes it difficult for us. We have so much to do and take care of other needs too. We have to be strong as women but we also have to let men be men. It can be hard for Black women to do that.

Other women also described womanhood in terms of strength. The views of Maya and Sonia were furthered by India, a 26-year-old Child Development Specialist who expressed:

Womanhood is the shared belief of women once they have completed adolescence and are ready to tackle/accept the task that life gives them. This isn’t always easy but women, especially Black women have to be strong to handle all that they have to do as women.

Conversely, in addition to focusing on the strength, sensitivity, and sensuality of women, womanhood was also described in terms of feminine behaviours, specifically the way that a woman cares for her family, her physical appearance and her

self-respect. When discussing the familial aspect of womanhood, Eryka, a 19-year-old single student shared:

Womanhood is being feminine and knowing their capabilities and responsibilities in relation to themselves and their families and carrying those out to the fullest.

In support of Eryka's view that womanhood is synonymous with family care, Jill, a 33-year-old married student provided the following narrative:

Womanhood is the state of being an adult female, acting according to what one has been taught accurately in terms of how you should conduct yourself in the world. Real women are always aware of how they portray themselves to others and whether they have children or not are always aware of how they conduct themselves, but if they are mothers, they are especially aware of setting a good example.

In addition to womanhood being associated with a woman caring for her family, other women defined womanhood in terms of how women should speak, dress and behave. For Opal, a 50-year-old divorced elementary school teacher:

Womanhood is when a young female adult reaches a state in life where she has developed mentally and physically and portrays the definite character of a woman in terms of how she speaks to others, dresses and behaves.

Other women spoke of the need for women to present themselves physically as 'real ladies'. This view was supported by Janet, a 27-year-old, single medical ward clerk, who said:

[Womanhood means] being able to raise her family in an orderly fashion. Carrying herself in a lady-like fashion ... looking and acting like a real lady should ... being productive in society as an employee, partner, wife, and mother.

Further, in addition to caring for their families and physically presenting themselves in a certain way, other women deemed self-respect to be an essential aspect of womanhood. For Harriett, a 55-year-old divorced, retired, postal worker, womanhood means:

To be responsible coupled with self-respect for one's own body and life. Not inferior to manhood, but a perfect compliment [sic] of them [men].

The womanhood-as-self-respect theme was furthered by Patti, a 28-year-old single graduate student with no children. She described womanhood in the following way:

Similarly, womanhood is all that characterizes a woman physically, mentally, and socially. Basically, respecting herself and everyone that she deals with, really.

Culture and societal influences also play a role in how these aspects are perceived, so people's perceptions of what this term means can be different.

Womanhood as self-respect was later voiced by Serena, a 37-year-old paraprofessional who expressed herself this way:

Womanhood involves the physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual development of a female. Furthermore, it involves a woman respecting her body, mind and spirit, being truthful and faithful in all her dealings and by being a woman who enriches the lives of all with whom she interacts.

In essence, womanhood included *feminine attitudes* (strength, sensitivity and sensuality) and *feminine behaviours* (familial care, physical appearance and self-respect). Interestingly, the conceptualizations of womanhood that were provided by these women were opposing yet complementary to the traditional role of men as aggressors, protectors and providers. For example, the view of womanhood as strength and sensitivity, carrying out their familial responsibilities, as well as respecting herself and her body, all directly influence the quality of black marriage and motherhood. Now that narratives of the first question of interest have been set forth, attention will be given to the second theme of this paper, the manifestation of womanhood.

Research question 2: How do African American women practice womanhood?

Theme 2: The demonstration of womanhood – womanhood as demonstrated through domestic leadership. When describing how womanhood is demonstrated, most of the participants believed that womanhood is manifested when a woman first demonstrates her ability to care for her home, and second, when she can take the lead in the absence of male leadership. Specifically, *domesticity* involved effectively managing her home and career, being her husband or partner's 'helpmeet', as well as being a provider and caretaker for her family when male leadership does not exist. Further, *leadership* necessitates that women balance their ability to be effective household managers *and* support men in their leadership role. When describing the domestic aspects of womanhood, Janet, a 27-year-old medical ward clerk, shared:

[Womanhood] means raising a family and thinking productively about how what you do affects other people.

In support of Janet's comment, Eryka, a 19-year-old female student shared:

[Womanhood] is shown when women take care of the children, have a good job, keep a clean house and live in a way that is considered 'appropriate' in terms of what her family and friends expects of her.

In light of the perspectives provided by Janet and Eryka, Sonia, an 18-year-old single student believed that womanhood is demonstrated when a woman successfully juggles her home and career life. She remarked:

Womanhood is demonstrated when women are successful in their careers and are a success in their homes too.

The commentary provided by the aforementioned women was further reinforced by Patti, a 28-year-old single graduate student with no children. She expressed herself in this way:

Womanhood can be demonstrated in ways such as physical features, also a provider and caretaker for her family, balances roles in her life (wife, mother, daughter), strong sense of identity, and able to give and receive support from others.

Moreover, in addition to the view that womanhood is demonstrated when women manage domestic responsibilities, other women believed that womanhood is demonstrated when women possess a certain moral calibre, spirituality and sensuality. These multi-existing aspects of womanhood were introduced by Maya, an 18-year-old single student, who shared the following:

Womanhood is demonstrated by believing in good morals and in God. A woman is portrayed as sexy and a motherly figure ... someone who cares for her family and children.

Further, for other participants, womanhood is verified by the way that a woman publicly and privately relates to her husband, the values that she instils in her children, as well as the esteem with which her family holds her. Serena, a 37-year-old paraprofessional described womanhood in the following way when she expressed:

Womanhood is demonstrated when a woman recognizes that she was created to be a man's helpmeet, is supportive of her husband, never criticizes him publicly or privately, loves him completely, rears children to be God-fearing, and with each passing day, makes those in her family thankful that she's a part of their lives.

In addition to the domestic characteristics that are evidence of demonstrative womanhood, the narratives of other women spoke of the exemplification of womanhood through leadership. Interestingly, two narratives revealed the circumstances by which women should assume the leadership role. In support of this statement, Jill, a 33-year-old married student shared:

Womanhood is demonstrated by a female's ability to handle her responsibilities in an appropriate fashion and to be a good leader if there is no man around.

The view that women assume the leadership role in the absence of men was later echoed by Harriett, a 55-year-old divorced, retired postal worker who commented that there was a need:

To recognize that women, while possessing inner strengths and abilities, accept the fact that women are the weaker vessel. [Womanhood also means] to take the lead where manhood is absent or incapable of taking the lead.

In support of the commentary provided by Jill and Harriett, Rosa, a 35-year-old single model/actress with no children discussed womanhood as demonstrated when the following situations arise:

Womanhood demonstrated is a physically full grown adult female that shoulders all responsibilities. She accounts for all of her actions physically, emotionally, and mentally. She takes the lead, yet is still submissive if she has a male head, and cares for her family matters. Both the woman and the man, live their lives according to past experiences – making the best decisions they know, all the time learning from their mistakes.

In general, the participants in this study believed womanhood to be demonstrated when: females are responsible for the care of their homes; are successful in their home and career lives; recognize their God-given role as man's helper; are providers and caretakers of their families; possess good morals; are spiritually conscious (e.g. believe in God); and are responsible and caring mothers. Also, *domesticity* involved: possessing good morals; success in their career and home lives; keeping a clean house; being her husband or partner's 'helpmeet'; as well as being a provider and caretaker for her family. Further, although these women recognized that environmental factors may necessitate that women assume the *leadership* role, they were aware of the need to balance their ability to be effective leaders with the need to support men in their God-ordained leadership role.

Discussion

This study investigated how a particular subset of African American women understand and perceive womanhood, as well as how these perceptions could influence the choices that black women make regarding marriage and motherhood. Using black feminist theory as the foundation, this study explored and analysed the perspectives of a sample of African American women, or what Watkins-Beatty referred to as a 'silenced majority'. Earlier in the paper, the following three questions were posed: (1) How do African American women define womanhood? (2) How do African American women practice womanhood? and (3) How do African American women understand and perceive womanhood, and how might these ideas influence the choices that they make regarding marriage and motherhood?

Subsequent paragraphs in this section will directly address each of these questions, with particular emphasis on the last question.

The definition of 'womanhood'

The African American women in this study defined womanhood in terms of sensitivity, sensuality and strength. Interestingly, these descriptors both support and contradict perceptions of womanhood that are generally accepted in the dominant culture. For example, although the sensitivity and sensuality descriptors both support hegemonic notions of femininity and womanhood (Bordo, 1993; Connell, 2002), womanhood as strength runs counter to this view. In support of the five adjectives that Maya used when describing womanhood (i.e. strong, sensitive, bold, loving and sensual) other women highlighted the inherent relationship difficulties experienced in black male–female relationships, which to a lesser degree may be indirectly responsible for lower rates of marriage among African Americans. For example, Sonia's acknowledgement that 'our [black women's] competition with men [black men] makes it difficult for us' (black women) 'to be strong as women' yet 'to let men be men', suggests three things. For one, this hints that competition (perceived or actual) may be one of the greatest sources of stress in the development of strong black relationships and subsequent black marriages. Also, given the educational and economic position of many of the women in this study, black women may find it especially difficult to be educationally and economically independent *and* be in a relationship with a man who is not as privileged in these respects, yet seeks to exercise control in the family (Hill, 2005). Further, given the advanced educational and economic status of African American women, balancing individual strength with the desire 'to let men be men' may be a larger area of contention in black male–female relationships than members of other racial or ethnic groups. Interestingly, although one factor alone could hardly be to blame, educational and economic discrepancies may explain *why* African Americans are least likely to marry, most likely to divorce and least likely to remarry.

Moreover, regardless of whether they have children, black women should be aware of how they 'portray themselves to others', particularly in regard to their speech, dress and behaviour. In this regard, black women deem it important to conduct themselves 'in a lady-like fashion' as employees, partners, wives and mothers. For many of the women in this study, being a 'lady' also means respecting one's body and life in general. Regarding the former, respecting one's body does not necessarily mean adopting the idealized notion of the thin female body (Hebl and Heatherton, 1998; Stevens et al., 1994). In addition, respect for their body may mean that black women associate certain styles of dress with attitudes that undermine and erode the strength and integrity of the black family. Conversely, respect for life may motivate African American women to choose to rear their children alone, with or without family support, in order to experience this key aspect of womanhood (Hill, 2005).

Further, womanhood was 'not inferior to manhood, but a perfect complement of them [men]' demonstrates that, as a group, black women are *not* in competition with black men. Even though popular novels, television shows and movies frequently characterize male–female relationships as inherently problematic (lacking appreciation, trust or respect), largely due to the need of black women to dominate black men, this is not an accurate reflection of how many black women perceive themselves in relation to black men. In other words, the narratives of the women in this study reveal that, even though they make up the largest number of women who have never married (Graefe and Kichter, 2002; US Census Bureau, 2005), black women achieve 'womanhood' when they successfully manage their personal and family responsibilities, whether established through marriage or motherhood, and support the black men in their lives by not competing with them. This naturally leads to the second question of interest, how womanhood is shown.

The demonstration of 'womanhood'

Essentially, black women demonstrate womanhood when they provide a secure and stable home life for their families. Based on the narratives provided by the women in this study, black women show that they have achieved 'womanhood' when: they effectively rear their families; are conscious of how their actions influence others; balance their responsibilities (as wives, mothers and daughters); and are moral and spiritual beings (e.g. 'believing in good morals and in God'). Of particular interest was Eryka's comment that women need to 'live in a way that is "appropriate" in terms of what her family and friends expects of her'. This may mean that black women may base 'appropriate' aspects of motherhood on the types of models that are most salient in their lives. So, for example, black women's attitudes regarding the importance of carrying out her domestic responsibilities, the way that she dresses, as well as the specific ways that she cares for her children (in relation to their physical, emotional, mental, psychological and spiritual needs) may be influenced by the types of 'influential models of womanhood' in her life. Given the importance of religion and spirituality in the lives of black women (Chaney, 2006, 2008a, 2008b; Chatters and Taylor, 2005; Mattis, 2000), the findings of this study suggest that African American women may gauge how successfully they demonstrate womanhood by the types of actions exhibited by their pastor's wife, other women in the church with whom they regularly associate and/or receive counsel, as well as women in their own families.

An unexpected finding in relation to the demonstration of womanhood was found in the view that women should be successful in their career *and* home lives. Given the likelihood that black families are more prone to experience marital dissolution and family restructuring (Taylor et al., 1997), this suggests that, in contrast to white feminists who have traditionally advocated for more presence and power in the workplace, black women view their careers as secondary to their home life. Moreover, in addition to the duality of success that is indicative of womanhood, reciprocity in the black male–female relationship was highlighted in

the perspective that womanhood involves being 'able to give and receive support from others'. Simply put, black men and women are expected to 'give and receive support' from one another. Further, even though the biblical notion that women are to be a 'helpmeet' for their spouse was introduced, other women voiced that they (black women) must 'be a good leader if there is no man around'. Essentially, this finding speaks directly to the prevalence of black female-headed households, and clearly suggests that, even though many black women assume the leadership role, they have no problem in relinquishing much of this power to the black men in their lives.

Limitations

The limitations of this study should be noted. First, the sample size was small and was primarily drawn from one state. Thus, one cannot be certain that the findings presented here can be generalized to other cities within the same state or to other cities in the United States. Furthermore, as the women who self-selected for participation in the study were attendees of a conference with a politically conservative agenda (i.e. increasing father involvement in the form of marriage), another possible limitation to the present findings is that black female respondents who supported a conference with a more liberal agenda may have provided different results.

Since the overwhelming majority of participants had moderate to high educational and income levels, their perceptions regarding what it means to be a woman may be substantially different from African American women who have lower education and socioeconomic levels. Interestingly, few previous studies have specifically targeted a group of women who attended a conference that specifically focused on strengthening African American marriages and increasing father-child involvement, and so this represents a major strength of the current study. In other words, because this study represented the views of African American women who willingly attended a conference whose sole aim was to encourage greater father involvement and stronger marriages among African Americans, the author views this group, albeit small and non-representative, as unique. Furthermore, although the black women self-selected for participation in this study, they represented various age, education, economic and marital levels, which elevated the black female perspective and served as an additional strength of the current study.

Direction for future studies

There are several ways that future studies can expound upon the findings that have been presented here. First, since African Americans are more likely to be reared in single-parent families, future research should examine the extent to which personal

and familial expectations influence African American women's entry into marriage or motherhood. Research in this area may reveal the inherent strength of black women to make a success of these roles where black male leadership is lacking or non-existent. Second, future research could expand upon this study by examining how black women who represent various stages of the life cycle perceive their roles as women. To better facilitate this, it would be advantageous for these studies to implement longitudinal designs that would allow African American women to build and expand upon these meanings during various stages in their lives. So, for example, examining the perspectives of black women who are single (never married), engaged, married, parents of one or more children, divorced, remarried, either before or after the death of a romantic partner or spouse), may find that women's assessment of their roles may not be static. Essentially, this would allow researchers to examine the extent to which black women's perceptions regarding 'womanhood' remain fixed or malleable over time.

Third, future research should examine the difficulties experienced by African American women who transition from independent leaders of their families to supporting their spouses or partners as 'helpmeets'. Since unemployment, underemployment and seasonal employment most affect a disproportionate number of black men (Taylor et al., 1997), this knowledge may lead to a greater understanding of the factors that make African American marital and cohabitation relationships more vulnerable to dissolution than those of other racial and ethnic groups. Most important, by focusing on the ways that single black mothers make sense of their roles as leaders, programmes that seek to strengthen these partnerships can help couples to appreciate the unique strengths that each brings to the relationship.

Last, given the few studies that have specifically addressed the importance of marriage and motherhood for African American women, future studies must examine the expectations of African American women who have (and have not) embarked on these particular markers of womanhood. Specifically, these studies should examine the personal, familial and communal benefits of marriage and motherhood for African American women. Future studies in respect of this theme could use the following questions as their focus: (1) How important is marriage to African American women? (2) How important is motherhood to African American women? (3) In what ways is the entry into marriage and motherhood influenced by the examples of other black women? (4) What do African American women expect from others in respect of attitudes and behaviours regarding marriage and motherhood? (5) In what specific ways should black women support black men? (6) What expectations do African American women hold for African American men regarding marriage and motherhood? (7) What are the most fulfilling aspects of marriage and motherhood for African American women? (8) What are the least fulfilling aspects of marriage and motherhood for African American women? (9) In what specific ways do black women feel that they should support black men? (10) What are the financial, economic and social constraints that increase or limit marriage and single-motherhood?

Conclusion

The true worth of a race must be measured by the character of its womanhood.

Mary McLeod Bethune (1933)

At the outset of this paper, I used the aforementioned quotation to infer that the character of the black race is largely dependent on the choices made by African American women, especially those choices related to marriage and motherhood. Although historically and contemporaneously, African American women have been foundational in keeping their families intact, as evidenced by the voices of the women in this study, achieving this goal has not always been easy. The strength of the black family has been compromised by the limited educational and economic standing of African American men, as well as by the increased educational and economic independence of African American women. In light of the many challenges that they face, black women have adopted a modified version of womanhood that values certain aspects of the dominant culture (e.g. sensuality, sensitivity and physical appearance), yet grounds their marriage and motherhood work within the context of strength. As a group, black women are less concerned with the white feminist value of asserting greater power in the workplace, than supporting their families as women. Interestingly, even where a strong black male presence is absent, black womanhood necessitates that these women become strong leaders for their children and for members of their community. As daughters, wives, students and mothers, these women, young and old, categorically define womanhood as feminine attitudes and behaviours and domestic leadership. Furthermore, given the value of religion and/or spirituality in their lives, these women defined womanhood in terms of nurturing support, high moral character, securing a stable home life and their own physical appearance and their conduct, as these individual and collective virtues positively reflect black womanhood in America. In spite of the abundance of media images that directly and indirectly infer that black women are committed to dominating and challenging the leadership of black men, the findings of this study refutes this view. As evidenced by the narratives of these black women, the character of the black race is based on the extent to which black men and women support, nurture and care for one another. The women in this study are living examples that stronger relationships between black men and women are indeed possible. Essentially, the perceptions of womanhood that were privileged by the women in this study were juxtaposed as distinct, yet mutually supportive roles to black men. Their commentary directly spoke to their desire to present themselves to others in a positive manner, to be responsible for themselves and their families, and to complement, not compete with the black men in their lives. These stories infuse the African American community with hope because they speak to the desire of black women to advance attitudes and behaviours that will benefit their families, and give demonstrative leadership where a black male presence does not exist,

which would in turn better the lives of her children. The capstone point is that the true worth of the black race must be attributed to the consistent strength, self-respect and domestic commitment of the black woman.

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