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*The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 2009; 621; 132

DOI: 10.1177/0002716208324852

The online version of this article can be found at:

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# Romantic Unions in an Era of Uncertainty: A Post-Moynihan Perspective on African American Women and Marriage

By

LINDA M. BURTON  
and  
M. BELINDA TUCKER

This article provides a brief overview of how African American women are situated in and around the thesis of the Moynihan Report. The authors take the lens of uncertainty and apply it to a post-Moynihan discussion of African American women and marriage. They discuss uncertainty in the temporal organization of poor women's lives and in the new terrains of gender relationships and how both influence African American women's thoughts and behaviors in their romantic relationships and marriages. They argue that much is to be learned from by focusing the lens in this way. It allows us to look at the contemporary romantic relationship and marriage behaviors of African American women in context and in ways that do not label them as having pathological behaviors that place them out of sync with broader societal trends.

*Keywords:* African American women; stereotypes; relationships; choices; gender roles; poverty; uncertainty

I don't know what life is going be like from one day to the next day. Everything is up in the air . . . my job, my children's sickness, my sickness, my mother's sickness, where we're going to live, how I'm going to get a ride to where I got to go. I don't have no time for a *for-real* relationship. I know that a *for-real* relationship takes time and more [time] than I can give on any day. You have to talk about things [with a partner] and have an understanding to make things work. You have to make some decisions about what the man will do and what [a woman] is suppose to do. It's not always about the woman running things, you know. You have to make a man feel like a man. Jesus, I don't have that kind of energy . . . I'm too busy worrying, fixin' to do something, going and coming, running around, taking care of things . . . no time to be still. All I have sometimes is one second to breathe. Besides that, I can't count on nothing from one time to the next, but maybe, the Lord. And, I think sometimes he forgets about me too.

Nadine, a low-income African American twenty-nine-year-old, single mother of three children, and participant in the ethnographic component of the Three-City Study,<sup>1</sup> provided the above

DOI: 10.1177/0002716208324852

commentary on her experiences in sustaining a romantic union while managing day-to-day family life in the context of long-term poverty. Demographically, she fits the stereotype of the young, poor, and never-married mothers featured in and around the discourse on low-income African American women and marriage spawned by Daniel Patrick Moynihan's report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (see Rainwater and Yancey 1967). However, Nadine's personal reflections on the "how-comes" and "why-nots" of marriage embody a slightly different tone and emphasis. Nadine's tenor about relationships is ambivalent and, unlike the Moynihan Report, does not characterize African American women as matriarchs who dominate romantic unions and emasculate unemployed male partners. Rather, Nadine gives voice to what has become a quagmire for most contemporary American women—how uncertainty influences the potential for and success of romantic and marital relationships.

Nadine's uncertainty is closely tied to her life course experiences with poverty but also is rooted in broader societal transformations that have reconfigured the temporal dimensions of everyday life and gender relations for individuals across all socioeconomic and cultural segments of the American population (Bauman 1991, 1995; Clark 1991; Giddens 1991, 1992; Johnson-Hanks 2006; Mills and Blossfeld 2005). Temporal uncertainty involves women's presumed infractions against socially prescribed moral codes of time use, their expectations and behaviors around the number of "years of life" they pray are available to them, and how they synchronize the daily rhythms of their family's needs with institutional timetables (e.g., business hours of social service agencies) (Abbott 2001; Burton and Sorensen 1993; Daly 1996). Gender role uncertainties derive, in large part, from the changing structural and relational dynamics of male and female labor market and educational experiences, as well as the tenuous nature of norms that govern the distribution of domestic tasks (Cherlin 2004; Franklin 1997; Hochschild 1989, 1997; Taylor, Tucker, and Mitchell-Kernan 1999).

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NOTE: We thank the Administration on Children and Families for supporting our research on marriage and relationships among low-income families through grant 90OJ2020. We also wish to acknowledge core support to the Three-City Study from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development through grants HD36093 and HD25936 and the National Science Foundation through grant SES-07-03968, as well as the support of many government agencies and private foundations.

In this article, using findings from our own programs of research as a base, we take the lens of uncertainty and apply it to a post-Moynihan discussion of African American women and marriage. We discuss uncertainty in the temporal organization of poor women's lives and in the new terrains of gender relationships and how both influence African American women's thoughts and behaviors in their romantic relationships and marriages. We argue that much is to be learned from focusing the lens in this way. It allows us to look at the contemporary romantic relationship and marriage behaviors of African American women in context and in ways that do not label them as having pathological behaviors that place them out of sync with broader societal trends. As we have learned from the Moynihan Report, interpreting demographic trends as having a dysfunctional base is easy to do when a group is studied in isolation and when their behaviors are interpreted out of context. Indeed, the legacy of pathologized ascriptions has discouraged the development of more mature analytical frames that consider the ordinary features of life that eventually emerge for all groups as a function of broader societal changes.

## From Pathology to Uncertainty: Shifting the Lens

While it is a demographic fact that low-income African American women represent the leading edge in the rise of single-motherhood in the United States, social scientists have made little progress in understanding what is happening on the ground level in their romantic relationships. Low-income African American women are not marrying at high rates, but they are continuing to become involved in romantic unions that produce children (Lincoln, Taylor, and Jackson 2008). How are the romantic relationships of African Americans created, situated, and experienced in contemporary American society? How do the trends discussed in the Moynihan Report help us to interpret current patterns?

To address these questions, we begin by acknowledging points made in the Moynihan Report about these issues. The report asserted that a determining factor in the increasingly "desperate" situation of so-called "lower-class" Negroes was family instability as displayed by the growing prevalence of out-of-wedlock childbearing, female-headed families, and the decreasing reliance on men's earnings for family support. The stated and unstated implications of these trends were clear. Although black women were not responsible for the joblessness and underemployment of black men, their apparent assumption of economic and social responsibilities for their households served to emasculate their men and undermine men's efforts to be proper husbands and fathers.

Moynihan argued that female dominance itself was not necessarily problematic, but given that the male breadwinner model was the prevailing paradigm in the United States and Western societies at that time, any marriage pattern that deviated from that model was bound to lead to trouble for mothers, fathers, their children, and the larger society. The misappropriated term "matriarch," divorced from its true anthropological meaning, came to dominate characterizations of

African American women as a result of the report (Collins 1991; Dickson 1993). This perception was not confined to the domains of policy or social science (from whence it came) but became equally pervasive in popular culture through written, visual, and spoken work (Benson-Smith 2005; Franklin 1997).

This way of thinking about trends in marriage and childbearing among low-income African American women sheds very little light on the inner workings of their intimate unions and continues to linger as a dominant paradigm as we consider the romantic relationships of low-income African American women today. To circumvent the conceptual bindings of this perspective, we contend that a more fruitful analytical paradigm for understanding the intimate unions of African American women is to interrogate the role of uncertainty as context, engine, and barrier in relationship formation and maintenance.

### *Poverty and uncertainty*

Our foray into a discussion of uncertainty begins with its place in poverty. The lives of impoverished African American women, and to a certain extent black women more generally, are steeped in uncertainty and its corollary, risk. Geof Wood, a British sociologist and specialist in international development, argues that uncertainty is the determining condition for impoverished persons (Wood 2001, 2003). Individuals and families with economic means and more or less stable sources of income can formulate strategic plans with a fair degree of confidence that those plans will come to fruition. For individuals living in poverty, however, it makes little sense to strategize in this way when you have little control over the forces that determine the viability of your plans.

Uncertainty, in the form of unreliability and insecurity, permeates the lives of impoverished African American women in a number of specific ways. Clearly, of course, the fundamental problem is limited income generation; the relegation to low-wage, intermittent employment; and the lack of meaningful access to alternative sources of income (e.g., “finding a rich husband”). In addition, reliance on government subsidies as a safety net is no longer possible with federally mandated limits on the extent of such support. These conditions create a cascade of instability for families. For example, the lack of income dictates transience in living situations given the gap between the price of housing and a low-income person’s ability to pay (National Low Income Housing Coalition 2008). These concerns, however, are not limited to those at the bottom of our economic rungs. Even today, many middle-class African Americans (as well as others) have emerged from backgrounds of relative deprivation and, given the vicissitudes of the labor market, may harbor very rational fears of economic loss and an uncertain life.

Wood (2001) also argues that in response to the pervasive absence of predictability about the future, people with limited means strive for risk reduction across multiple domains of life. This point extends to intimate relationships. A study from one of our research programs (Tucker, Taylor, and Mitchell-Kernan 1993) showed that older women eschewed serious romantic relationships to avoid the risks associated with involvement at that stage of life: financial (many

had finally obtained some degree of financial stability and were concerned that monetary entanglements with another would deplete their resources), physical (older men were more likely to become infirm, require care, and become dependent), and psychological (they preferred a life of independence, finally free from the demands of others—something they had been denied in the past in every aspect of their lives).<sup>2</sup>

Conversely, in a fundamental and practical sense, having children conveys stability and risk reduction. As others have noted, a child is a permanent attachment (no matter what transpires with the child's father or other family members) and is also an investment in the future and a symbol of hope (Burton 1990; Edin and Kefalas 2005). Having a child is the creation of a stable, enduring, perhaps life-long, emotional and physical bond. Moreover, children can structure the hours, days, years of one's life, unlike any other social phenomenon or event.

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*[I]n a fundamental and practical sense, having children conveys stability and risk reduction.*

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The lens of uncertainty also allows us to reconceptualize other dimensions of African American women's lives that have been mischaracterized or demonized in some previous writings but are pertinent to interpreting patterns in romantic relationships and marriage. In the next section, we explore uncertainty and notions of time and their potential impact on intimacy and union formation among African American women.

## Temporal Uncertainty and Romantic Relationships

We have studied and lived the lives of African American women, mothers, and wives for well over a quarter of a century. Our personal and scientific experiences have revealed to us that uncertainties about the nature of time in the lives of African American women, particularly low-income women, complicate and compromise their romantic relationships. Temporal uncertainty can be seen across several domains in African American women's lives. First, it is apparent in the struggles women, particularly those receiving welfare, face in debunking negative stereotypes and moral judgments about how they supposedly use time (e.g., watching soap operas rather than working). It underlies the ways some policy makers have judged African American women and is occasionally intimated in the "cracks" regular folks make about them.

For example, several social service workers in the Three-City Study offered the following comments: “Poor black women operate on colored people’s time. . . . They are lazy and can’t read a clock for the life of them”; “A black woman don’t know a thing about being on time but she does know about maxing and relaxing”; and “They know how to waste time on other peoples’ dime.” In some circles, these opinions suggest that poor African American women are not entitled to discretionary time or to occasionally being late. Rather, their time use, en masse, is subject to public scrutiny and approval in ways that are nonnegotiable (Tubbs, Roy, and Burton 2005). The undergirding mantra in these opinions is that poor women have not earned the right to use their time in any way other than working to get off welfare.

Such characterizations have followed women into many domains of their lives, including intimate unions. For example, we have observed in the Three-City Study ethnography that low-income women often experience uncertainty concerning their temporal worthiness and are occasionally chastised by their partners about their time use based on images that are not in line with their actual behaviors. Sandra, a thirty-five-year-old African American participant in the study, recounted this story concerning her boyfriend’s perception about her time use:

I was at home laying on the couch yesterday evening. I was tired from working a twelve-hour shift and taking care of my children and my mother. My boyfriend walks in the door and starts fussing [and said,] “Get your lazy ass up off that couch. You just like them lazy women who lay around, wanting to get their nails and hair done, and watching soap operas all damn day. You ain’t no white woman, you ain’t got time for that stuff. You betta’ get up. I don’t want no lazy, welfare-getting Black women. If I’m spending my time working you betta’ be doing the same.”

What is interesting about Sandra’s comments is that her boyfriend is superimposing a stereotype about African American women’s time use on her that in no way approximates her real-time behaviors. Ethnographic data from three years of interviews and participant observations with Sandra, her children, and occasionally her boyfriend indicate that she is hardworking, spends most of her waking hours tending to the needs of others, is on time for appointments, and rarely ever takes time to relax or engage in self-care. Thus, African American male partners occasionally subscribe to misconstrued behaviors attributed to black women via the Moynihan Report. We are personally familiar with these attributions. Although we both were adolescents at the time of the report’s release, we came into womanhood ever mindful of the derisive images of African American women that it propelled into popular use in both public and private spheres. We have witnessed, over time, that a legitimate temporal infraction by an African American woman can quickly evoke charges of shiftlessness, disorganization, or “stealing time that you have not earned.”

Second, uncertainty is reflected in women’s reckonings with their temporal limitations of their life expectancies—specifically their premonitions about the length of their’s and their partners’ lives. Current health disparities data reveal that poverty reduces the life expectancies of low-income African American men and women (House 2002; National Center for Health Statistics 2001). Overall, black Americans live far fewer years than whites—the mortality differential



attributed to multiple chronic fatal diseases that emerge for African Americans in childhood and young adulthood and soaring death rates owing to the prevalence of homicide and risk behaviors (e.g., drug addiction) among low-income African American males (Elo 2001; Hayward et al. 2000).

Given the realities of high early death rates for African Americans, it is plausible for some to envision survival to a “ripe old age” an unlikely prospect. These truncated views of length of life can heighten uncertainty in ways that directly impact romantic relationships and marriage (Burton 1990). For example, when both a woman and her partner believe that *he* will not live past the age of twenty-five, the intensity of their relationship can escalate quickly, with coresidential living arrangements and a pregnancy ensuing before the couple has taken the time to really get to know one another. We also have seen in our research how contextual cues (e.g., neighborhood violence) hasten some African American women to anticipate the early demise of their partners, and how, to reduce uncertainty and potential grief, women will severely limit their attachment and romantic commitment (Burton et al. 2007; Tucker 2005).

In addition, low-income women’s health and their family caregiving responsibilities also place them in a temporal bind that compromises the amount of time they can invest in relationships (Roy, Tubbs, and Burton 2004). Some African American women, as with their men, become aware, at very early ages, of the fact that they have a diminished life expectancy due to poor health. For example, Yvonne, a Three-City Study participant, stated,

Me and my mom talk about how many problems I’ve had. I’m only twenty-one and I’ve had all these problems [asthma, gynecological tumors, and depression] and I worry about in coming years what’s going to happen. There’s women out there in their thirties having hysterectomies. Is that going to be me? Am I going to die at forty-five?

Women must decide how they will allocate their time based on their health and the health of others. We see the dilemmas women face in doing so in the case of Francine, another Three-City Study participant. Francine, a thirty-year-old mother of three children aged four, six, and eight, also had too many other responsibilities to focus on her own health. As a baby and toddler, she was often hospitalized with pneumonia; she was not expected to live into the school years. She was hospitalized every year with pneumonia until her freshman year of high school. When Francine joined the ethnographic study, she had just received a “temporary diagnosis of stomach cancer,” but Francine did not return to the doctor until the pain was unbearable and she “didn’t have other folks to take care of.” Her six-year-old asthmatic son required constant attention. Francine’s mother suffered a recent stroke, a heart attack, and had an “orange-sized” tumor in her chest. Francine, like many of the mothers in the study, was her own mother’s primary caregiver. With no alternatives for caring for her mother or children, Francine had no time for treatment for her own medical conditions. And she had no time for marriage.

Finally, temporal uncertainty rests in women’s attempts to manage the daily rhythms of their families while adhering to institutional timetables, notably the



nine-to-five business hours of social service agencies (Burton and Sorenson 1993). These temporal incongruencies heighten feelings of uncertainty for women as the capricious nature of work schedules, child care, garnering reliable transportation, and the anticipation of long waits in line punctuate their lack of control over time and the fact that they are at the mercy of others' schedules. These features of time and uncertainty were not considered in the Moynihan debates, nor, some forty years later, have they been systematically used to explore and inform interpretations of marriage and romantic relationship patterns among low-income African American women.

In summary, in the lives of low-income African American women there is massive uncertainty about time—uncertainty created by stereotypes, truncated life expectancies, failing health, and the adherence to incongruent institutional timetables. Within these domains, African American women are often forced to operate outside of the normative boundaries of time. In some cases, these demands can foster the self-reliance and creative problem solving that have ensured African American women's and their families' survival over time. But these temporal quagmires also challenge the sustainability of long-term romantic relationships and marriage. Perhaps there is truly not enough time left in the day to nurture a romantic relationship, especially when one also has to negotiate another source of uncertainty—namely, the new terrains of gender roles.

## Gender Relationships: Negotiating New Terrains, Roles, and Obligations

With uncertainty as a guiding principle in our analysis of intimate union formation and maintenance among African American women, we recognize that in a more general societal sense, the foundation for romantic relationships is today anything but *terra firma*. Although social relationships in the United States have evolved in some remarkable and substantive ways since the 1960s, perhaps the most consequential change has been the manner in which women and men relate to each other (Solomon and Knobloch 2001). Men and women have significantly realigned expectations regarding gender-specific behaviors across settings, although consensus about proper conduct for each has apparently diminished. Concerning romantic unions, Cherlin (2004) argues that Americans in general are uncertain and confused about appropriate behavior for partners—part of the process he views as the “deinstitutionalization of marriage.”

In recent years, both academic and more literary treatments have signaled unusual strain in relationships between African American men and women (e.g., Aborampah 1989; McMillan 1992; Pinderhughes, 2002). We argue that even greater ambiguity surrounds African American family roles, as structural forces coupled with experientially induced sociocultural tendencies drive new attitudinal and behavioral patterns. We view these new relationship challenges as being rooted in a complex interplay between new economic and resource realities;

changing conceptualizations of appropriate gender-specific behavior; and changing society-wide beliefs about the nature, value, and function of marriage.

### *New economic realities*

African American women have always played essential economic roles within their families. Throughout the past century, formal labor force participation has steadily increased—especially for married women. Landry (2000) views African American women as the vanguard of a “revolution” in the construction of domestic relationships in male-female headed families, arguing that the employment of black wives fueled the changes in household gender dynamics that idealized more egalitarian modes of conduct. Only a quarter of married African American women worked in the 1940s (compared to 8 percent of white wives) (U.S. Census Bureau 1961). By 2004, working wives had become the dominant paradigm in the United States, as 70 percent of black and 60 percent of white married women held jobs (U.S. Department of Labor 2005).

These statistics obscure the extent of black women’s economic engagement: they have been more likely than white women to be employed full-time (Harrison 2003), to return to work more quickly after childbearing (Smith and Amachu 1999), and to endure significantly longer commutes to work (Johnston 1998). As Mason (2005) notes, between 1964 and 2000, African American women’s labor market earnings improved relative to black men but declined relative to white women (Newsome and Doodoo 2002). In 2000, black women’s average weekly wage was 79 percent of black men’s and 90 percent of white women’s wages; the comparable proportion for white women to men was 61 percent (Mason 2005), which demonstrates greater familial reliance on the income of African American women.

Beneath these new economic realities is the constant of employment uncertainty. Although African American women and men have consistently been more vulnerable than other racial groups to layoffs and plant closings, they have been especially susceptible during national economic upheavals (Kletzer 1991; Elvira and Zatzick 2002; Fairlie and Kletzer 1996). Dorman (2005) reports that during the major recession of the early 1980s, more than 7 percent of black workers were displaced,<sup>3</sup> compared to not quite 5 percent of white workers. Job loss is more debilitating for blacks, since they have greater difficulty securing new jobs (Dorman 2005; Kletzer 1991; Yang 2007). Due in large part to a concentration of employment in the sectors hit hardest by the recession of the early 1980s, embodied by deindustrialization of large urban centers, the impact on black men was especially severe (Johnson and Oliver 1991; Kletzer 1991; Spalter-Roth and Lowenthal 2005; Wilson 1987). The negative impact of economic strain on marital relationships has been well documented (Conger et al. 1990; Cutrona et al. 2003). Clara, a participant in the Three-City Study, agrees: “It is hard to keep a relationship together when most of your time is spent worrying about which one of us is gonna’ have a job the next day. It’s like flying blind everyday, never knowing what to expect.”

### *Growing male-female resource gap*

Despite the context of erratic employment prospects, the latter half of the twentieth century witnessed great educational gains for African Americans overall. The proportion of African Americans earning high school diplomas rose from 13.7 percent in 1950 to 72.3 percent in 2000; those with college degrees went from 2.2 to 14.3 percent (U.S. Census Bureau 2006a, 2006b). However, although fairly equal proportions of black men and women were college-educated through 1990, since then the educational trajectories of men and women have diverged (*Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 2007). In 2000, 13.1 percent of black men held bachelor's degrees, relative to 15.2 percent of black women. Enrollment data portend a deepening crisis: in 2005, 45 percent of black women and 35 percent of black men aged eighteen to nineteen were enrolled in college; the comparable figures for ages twenty-two to twenty-four were 31 and 20 percent (U.S. Census Bureau 2007). Since a college education is a foundational resource for many upper-level jobs, the employment prospects of women and men are also becoming more divergent—further complicating male-female romantic relationship formation and maintenance.

Although African American women have always been far more likely than white women to marry men with less education and lower occupational status (e.g., Spanier and Glick 1980; Lichter, Anderson, and Hayward 1995), the increasing gender gap in labor market placement and education has placed black female-male relationships on even more uncertain contextual grounds. Arguably a husband-wife educational gap of high school diploma versus less than high school (which was more characteristic of earlier generations) is more socioculturally congruent than college/professional degree versus high school/trade school.

Although the effect of the latter incongruence on African American relationships has rarely been addressed, a recent study from one of our research programs raises a number of issues: Furdyna, Tucker, and James (2008) found that marital income disparities favoring wives did *not* have the direct, negative effect on the happiness of black wives that has been observed for white wives. Rather, black wives' happiness was compromised when the educational gap between partners was large, which suggested to the authors that although black marriages have historically accommodated more egalitarian economic roles, the growing educational gap between women and men poses a formidable threat for intimate relationships.

Inasmuch as postsecondary educational experiences are, in effect, cultural socializations as well as status markers, large differences in education may affect a couple's way of relating to and engaging one another. For example, several of the women in the Three-City Study noted that their partners were more apprehensive about their going to school and getting an education than working. Partners typically argued that "their women" would outgrow them if they got more education and would be "too smart for the relationship."

### *Societal change in the status of women*

Concurrent with these developments, the women's movement has driven society-wide changes in gender relationships by giving women greater voice and

structural power in many domains as well as a greater tolerance for and valuation of female independence. Although couples across the nation were struggling to redefine the terms of the marital bond and find the most appropriate ways to handle the responsibilities of managing homes and families, the task for African American couples was more complex and delicate. Studies have shown that African American men display a greater willingness to share domestic tasks (Hossain and Roopnarine 1993; Xu, Hudspeth, and Estes 1997), yet they do not display an ideological commitment to such arrangements (Kane 2000).

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*[A] delicate dance is required of women to balance what is viewed in many African American communities as the need to elevate and honor manhood (especially those who have committed to families) while carrying out necessary obligations and tasks.*

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African American women are also more likely than white women to report a preference for males' having primary economic responsibility (Taylor, Tucker, and Mitchell-Kernan 1999), despite the remoteness of such a prospect. Hatchett, Veroff, and Douvan (1995) have argued that for many African Americans, a more traditional alignment of household responsibilities is viewed as an achievement in the larger society's terms. Haynes (2000) observed a similar phenomenon in middle-class African American marriages but noted that women, in particular, have difficulty maintaining hard-won autonomy (via work and educational status) and at the same time protecting and preserving male ego and authority. These studies suggest (consistent with our personal observations) that a delicate dance is required of women to balance what is viewed in many African American communities as the need to elevate and honor manhood (especially those who have committed to families) while carrying out necessary obligations and tasks. A woman's task is to be strong, but not to overshadow her man. Nadine's opening comments in this article suggest that she has taken this point to heart.

#### *Evolving perspectives on the nature, value, and function of marriage*

The set of circumstances described above affect union behavior through the prism of dynamic views on the nature, value, and function of marriage. Cherlin

(2004) has argued that social norms concerning the behavior of marital partners have so weakened that one cannot rely on community understandings for knowledge of proper conduct. Americans irrespective of ethnicity and gender continue to value the institution of marriage (Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001; Tucker 2000) but also show greater tolerance of an array of behaviors that formerly were negatively sanctioned, including divorce, nonmarital childbirth, cohabitation, same-sex unions, and infidelity (Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001). Although these trends have been observed society-wide, evidence also shows that this expansion of tolerance occurred earlier and has been much more broadly adopted, in the African American community (Tucker and James 2005).

Is something else especially unusual about current conditions? Empirical data on the complex forces affecting the likelihood of entering into and the ability to maintain relationships are lacking. We nonetheless suggest that the meaning and influence of shifts in resources and values are complicated by a new and widely embraced emphasis on female independence. This respect for female independence preceded the feminist movement of the 1960s and corresponds with contemporary cultural trends. The cultural elevation of highly successful single (even if sometimes partnered) African American women (e.g., Oprah Winfrey, Condoleezza Rice) has demonstrated the possibilities and benefits of going solo. Many songs by popular all-female African American groups celebrate female independence and reliance on self (e.g., "Independent Women" by Destiny's Child; "Control" by Janet Jackson; "Depend on Myself" by TLC).

We strongly assert, though, that the elevation of women's independence must not be viewed through the distorted lens and constraints of Moynihan's sense of "matriarchy." Moynihan misapplied the anthropological term to connote domination of marriage, men, and households by women, not coincidentally while conveniently ignoring the role of welfare policy in isolating or banishing men from Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC)-supported households. The emphasis in the new conceptualization of African American womanhood is self-reliance and self-discovery—not control of others (Giddings 1984). As such, African American successful relationship formation and nurturance is likely to require a novel vision and appreciation of what partners can and should bring to a union. This new compact will also require new forms of negotiation, including a reconstruction of the basis of power and privilege and a new language of process.

Stevenson (1996) and Hill (2005) remind us that the marital contract among African Americans has always differed in significant ways from that embraced by the dominant white society. Marriage has not been protective for black women and has rarely provided the substantial economic benefits that white wives could expect. It is also clear that while more privileged African American women are capable of exercising their independence, the circumstances of poor women are only growing worse, given the disintegration of societal safety nets, the disappearance of low-skill jobs that pay a living wage, and the "demise of female-centered support systems" (Hill 2005). Because the men these women would have access to as potential partners have fared no better in this global economic market, it is difficult to see how marriage would be to either's benefit.

## Conclusion

In this discussion, we have attempted to provide an alternate lens through which to view past and current patterns of intimate union formation and maintenance by African American women. We have made uncertainty the framework for our analysis and considered how poverty creates a context of insecurity for women and families, how temporal dimensions of peoples' lives are reconfigured in contemporary society and compromise the potential for long-term relationships, and how changing gender roles increase ambiguity about proper role enactment in female-male relationships. We also have sought to demonstrate how uncertainty frames perceptions, attitudes, assessments, decision making, and behaviors about marriage and intimate unions for African Americans and how it renders contextually relevant interpretations that were sorely missing from the Moynihan discourse and, to some extent, from comparable discussions today.

Unlike what the Moynihan Report suggested, we do not see low-income African American women's trends in marriage and romantic unions as pathologically out of line with the growing numbers of unmarried women and single mothers across all groups in contemporary American culture (Stacey 1998). We are hopeful that the uncertainty that is the foundation of romantic relationships today will reinforce the adaptive skills that have sustained African American women and their families across time. However, the tasks for reducing poverty, reconciling time binds, and recalibrating gender-linked behavioral expectations is an urgent challenge for many groups and nations. Perhaps interrogating the course of African American women and marriage using the uncertainty lens will yield insights that are relevant for resolving those challenges for others.

We close with the words of Eleanor Holmes Norton (1970, p. 404), who made an especially astute observation when societal changes around marriage and romantic relationships first became evident: "With children no longer the universally accepted reason for marriage, marriages are going to have to exist on their own merits. Marriages are going to have to exist because they possess inherent qualities which make them worthy of existing, a plane to which the institution has never before been elevated." It may be that marriage as we have known it in contemporary times will not survive "on its own terms" as Norton warned, but the need for human companionship and love remains intrinsic to the human condition. As subsequent generations are being socialized to enter romantic relationships and to form families, serious community-wide conversations about how to address the current dilemma in this era of uncertainty are essential.

## Notes

1. The Three-City Study (Welfare, Children, and Families: A Three-City Study) is a multilevel, multi-method longitudinal project designed to examine, in great detail, the lives of urban African American, Mexican American, Puerto Rican, and non-Hispanic white low-income families with children in Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio. The study comprises three interrelated components: a longitudinal survey of about 2,400 low-income families; a more intensive study of about 700 young children and their caregivers in a subsample of the survey families, which is called the Embedded Developmental Study (EDS); and an



ethnographic study of 256 families with young children (including 42 families of a child who has a disability) and of the neighborhoods in which they reside. For a detailed description of the Three-City Study, see <http://web.jhu.edu/threecitystudy>

2. This theme can be generalized to older middle-class women across race and ethnicity who also hesitate to risk their freedom and independence for caretaking of new partners in old age (Carol Stack, personal communication, 2008)

3. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2008) defines displacement as losing or leaving a job due to plant or company closure or moves, insufficient work, or abolition of position or shift.

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