That’s The Way Love Goes:

An Examination of the Romantic Experiences of Black Middle Class Women

by

LesLeigh Domanique Ariel Ford

Department of Sociology
Duke University

Date:_______________________

Approved:

___________________________
Linda M. Burton, Supervisor

___________________________
Eduardo Bonilla-Silva

___________________________
Tyson Brown

___________________________
Jessi Streib

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Sociology in the Graduate School of Duke University

2018
ABSTRACT

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Abstract

Research on romantic partnering has traditionally focused on the process of relationship formation, marital stability and permanence, and the problems created by distress in relationships. Over the last several decades, declines in marriage, increases in divorce and remarriage, and delayed and non-marital childbirths have led scholars to investigate the factors that contribute to these patterns. In addition to overall changes in romantic partnering arrangements, it important to acknowledge that there are deep racial and gender-based inequalities in dating, romantic relationships, and marriage. Specifically, for Black Americans scholars have focused much of their inquiry on the processes and patterns involved in romantic relationship and family formation among low-income and economically disadvantaged Black women, with emphases on the availability of Black men as viable partners, marriage as a way to escape poverty, and non-traditional family forms. Less attention, however, has been paid to the romantic and intimate lives of middle class Black women. While it is entirely possible that the romantic beliefs, aspirations, and actions of middle class Black women are similar to low-income Black women, it stands to reason that women who have more education, higher incomes, and greater access to resources and ability to deploy these resources will approach and engage in romantic interactions in ways that are distinct and nuanced.
Drawing on 52 in-depth interviews with Black middle class women, I examined how these women approached and engaged in romantic interactions and relationships. Three studies are presented here. The first study explored how parents’ behaviors, socialization practices, and messaging shaped Black middle class women’s attitudes, beliefs, expectations, and actions in romantic or intimate relationships. I outlined existing research on the transmission of beliefs and knowledge and present a brief summary of the ways that socialization, family structure and familial characteristics, and social learning and interactional characteristics in the family of origin informed individuals’ beliefs about love and dating. Using intergenerational transmission and social exchange theories to guide this study, results indicated that respondents perceived that their parents employ four types of messaging about romantic relationships and partnering – practical, progressive, protective, and principled.

In the second study, I explored the nonlinearity of romantic experiences and relationships for middle class Black women and considered what role emotions play in these romantic encounters. I examined the relationship between Black middle class women’s location in the marriage market and the kinds of nonlinear relationships Black middle-class women participate in. The marriage market structures the kinds of romantic opportunities that Black middle-class women have, the opportunity to engage in relationships, and the emotions they experience in these engagements. In this study, I queried a finding I found early on in my analysis of the data. If marriage, which was a
goal for more than 95 percent of the unmarried respondents in this study, was not a viable or immediately present option for these women, what kinds of relationship arrangements did they engage in and why? Results showed respondents initiated and evaluated romantic interactions and commitments, decided to end or reengage with romantic partners, and determined whether a relationship is worth maintaining or not. I paid particular attention to respondents’ emotions throughout these processes and the bidirectional influence of women’s emotions on their relational experiences. An appreciation for the role of uncertainty in the lives of respondents grounded these analyses as I took into account how relational, economic, and interpersonal insecurity was related to the aforementioned outcomes.

In the third study, I investigated marital satisfaction among Black middle class women. To do so, I considered women’s relational aspirations and experiences and define the expectations, characteristics, and conditions a romantic partner or relationship met in order for women to express contentment or happiness in their marriages. Additionally, I identified shared themes associated with respondent’s marital dissatisfaction.

Despite some clear racialized and gendered inequalities, results indicated that Black middle class women are reflective, strategic, hopeful, and committed to establishing fulfilling romantic interactions. I argue that traditional findings on the romantic partnering practices and processes largely ignore the relationship between the
intergenerational transmission of beliefs and values about romantic love, intimacy, and commitment, the ways that race, class, gender, power, and inequality intersect to create a sometimes uneven, unpredictable, movement-filled romantic landscape for Black women, and the role of emotional and financial safety and security, balancing marriage, career, and motherhood, and the desire for personal responsibility influence marital satisfaction among middle-class Black women.
Dedication

For Paul, Gertrude, and Paula.

When great trees fall,
rocks on distant hills shudder,
lions hunker down
in tall grasses,
and even elephants
lumber after safety.

When great trees fall
in forests,
small things recoil into silence,
their senses
eroded beyond fear.

When great souls die,
the air around us becomes
light, rare, sterile.
We breathe, briefly.
Our eyes, briefly,
see with
a hurtful clarity.
Our memory, suddenly sharpened,
examines,
gnaws on kind words
unsaid,
promised walks
never taken.

Great souls die and
our reality, bound to
them, takes leave of us.
Our souls,
dependent upon their
nurture,
now shrink, wizened.
Our minds, formed and informed by their radiance, fall away. We are not so much maddened as reduced to the unutterable ignorance of dark, cold caves.

And when great souls die, after a period peace blooms, slowly and always irregularly. Spaces fill with a kind of soothing electric vibration. Our senses, restored, never to be the same, whisper to us. They existed. They existed. We can be. Be and be better. For they existed.

--Maya Angelou
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was very young. Not a moment was wasted. There were required ballet classes and violin lessons. We flew kites, went ice-skating, tobogganing and skiing, and visited science centers, museums, and the theatre. My mom, who was an avid athlete well into her sixties, gave me my first basketball, swim, and tennis lessons. One of my favorite stories is that my mother grew tired of me spending my afternoons watching Dukes of Hazzard with my grandfather while she was worked. The story went that she saw me hop through the window and into the front seat of my grandfather’s 1984 Cadillac Eldorado one day, and that was the final straw. When the next school year started, she forged my birth certificate and enrolled me in Kindergarten a year early. A nontraditional approach, but effective nonetheless. I could always count on her to show up and fight for me. Whether it was in dealing with an elementary school bully, an unreasonable high school teacher, or a hardheaded boyfriend, my mother was always in my corner.

My grandparents, Paul David Ford and Gertrude Swilley Ford, were the glue that held our family together. They were also my biggest supporters and cheerleaders. They never missed a school drop-off or pick up, basketball game or volleyball match, recital or graduation ceremony. If ever I was in need of help with a science fair project or resources for just about anything school related, all I had to do was ask. While I had a sense during college that I would pursue graduate or professional studies at some point in my life, I know that it was my grandparents who probably saw the first flashes of
potential, or at least confidence, in me. When my grandfather took me to pre-school one
day, we ran into one of his acquaintances on the way. His friend asked me, “And where
do you go to school?” I coyly responded, “Mercy College”, and after a long dramatic
pause, I added, “Preschool”.

My mother, grandmother, and grandfather would be so proud of this
accomplishment. It truly belongs to them.
Chapter 1. Introduction

Over the last several decades, social scientists have paid considerable attention to the declines in the rates of marriage among young American adults, particularly African Americans (Cherlin 2003; 2005). After relative parity in marriage rates between Black and white couples for almost seven decades, Tucker and Taylor (1989) issued a call to arms for a more in-depth examination into the romantic lives of Black Americans as Black marriage rates steadily declined starting in the 1950s. In 1950, the percentages of Black and white women (aged fifteen and over) who were currently married were relatively the same, 64 percent and 67 percent respectively (Besharov & West 2001). By 1998, the percentage of married white women had declined by thirteen percent to 58 percent. The decline in marriage among Black women over the same time period was forty-four percent – a decline which was more than three times larger than that of white women— to just 36 percent. The decline in marriage rates among African Americans was relegated to discussions of male joblessness and the overall national trend in the decoupling of marriage and childbearing. By focusing the discourse in this way, little attention was focused on the meanings, behaviors, and patterns of romance, amorous relationships, and partnership formation that undergirded these trends (Cherlin 1998).

While marriage rates have declined among Blacks, this trend does not signal a decline in romantic involvement between Black men and Black women (Raley, Sweeney,
& Wondra, 2016; Tucker & Taylor, 1989). Still, Black women are less likely to participate in traditional forms of partnership (e.g. marriage or domestic partnerships) and spend a greater proportion of their adult lives in an unmarried state than women in other racial groups (Elliott, Krivickas, Brault, & Kreider, 2012; Pew Research Center, 2014). This decline is concerning, in part, because many Black women are not reaping the benefits associated with marriage for themselves or their children. Overwhelming evidence suggests that marriage provides physical, psychological, and financial well-being advantages for individuals (Blackman, Clayton, Glenn, Malone-Colon, & Roberts, 2005; Malone-Colon, 2007), and children who are raised in households with married parents tend to demonstrate more favorable developmental outcomes over time than children who do not (Blackman et al., 2005; Malone-Colon, 2007; Marks, Hopkins-Williams, Cheney, Nestruk, & Sasser, 2008).

To date, little empirical evidence exists about the attitudes and actions associated with romantic interactions and unions among unmarried Black adults that may or may not ultimately culminate in marriage (Lincoln, Taylor, & Jackson 2008). Moreover, there has been little empirical inquiry on dating, cohabitation, intimate expectations and aspirations, and marriage among middle-class Black Americans. Existing scholarly research on this topic has primarily focused on low-income or poor Black women and single mothers (Burton & Tucker 2009) or has scrutinized Black women’s sexual or reproductive behavior (Brown & Keith 2003). Research on the former is guided by the
assumption that marriage is the goal or capstone of all romantic relationships and the way out of poverty for Black women. While research on the latter has tended to amplify stereotypes of Black women in particular low-income, economically disadvantaged Black women. Empirically, little is known about how Black intimate unions are formed and the processes involved in the initiation, evaluation, maintenance, and dissolution of intimate relationships for Black middle class women. As such, uncovering the romantic relationship processes and patterns among middle class Black women is a critical area of empirical inquiry. Such is the focus of this study.

Scholars have investigated Black families in the United States, and as an extension of this arrangement, romantic and familial relations among romantic partners, fathers, mothers, husbands, wives, children, and extended family members for more than a century. However, much of the empirical interest has focused on the negative, dysfunctional aspects of Black family life. There has been significant scholarly interest and concern over declining marriage rates, increases in the proportion of out of wedlock births, and rising rates of cohabitation among Blacks, and to a lesser extent all Americans (Burton, 1992; Guzzo, 2014; Lacy, 2007; Patillo, 2013; Small & Newman, 2001; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995). Commonly, scholars have used structural arguments to account for the decline in marital rates among Black Americans (Wilson, 1987), however, scholars argue that declining employment prospects for Black men and rising
incarceration rates alone do not fully explain the difference in marriage rates between Blacks and other racial groups in the United States (Raley et al., 2015).

Despite the prevalence of studies that focus on dysfunction in romantic relationships among Blacks and structural factors that disqualify Black men from being “suitable” partners, there is increasing evidence that Black marriages are strong in many ways. Determination and willingness to working through difficult times (Chaney, 2010); adoption of flexible family roles (Hill, 2003); willingness to share household labor (Marks, Hopkins, Chaney, Monroe, Nesteruk, 2008); shared family vision (Marks et al., 2008); and religious compatibility (Veroff, Douvan, & Hatchett, 1995) are cited among family researchers as attributes and behaviors that contribute to strong Black marriages. In addition to the aforementioned qualities, higher socioeconomic status is associated with more content, enduring marriages in Black communities. With this prior research in mind, I sought to describe how Black middle class women think about and engage in romantic interactions and relationships and whether marriage is a capstone to these relationships.

1.1 Motivation

Though largely absent in sociological research, the humanities, including art, history, literature, musicology, and philosophy, scholarship often portray Black middle class women as embodying respectability, piety, sexual purity, inner strength and
outward stability for Black family and as a progressive, upstanding representation of the larger Black community (Dabel, 2008). In fact, these depictions often position middle class Black women as the cultural and social antithesis to stereotypes associated with poor Black women, who have long been characterized as hyper-sexualized, jezebels, or otherwise deviant (Collins, 2000). As such, the invisibility of Black women in scholarly work on romantic partnering is not entirely structural. It is also moral in nature. Black middle class women, who are revered as maternal, supportive, and self-sacrificing, are excluded from scholarly discourse on romantic relationships and partnering, because this aspect of their identities is not necessarily seen as consistent with the roles or representations they assume in Black families, Black communities, and in mainstream American culture. Moreover, the academy is not a particularly diverse space with adequate representation of the kinds of scholars who would explore this area of research.

It is important to study the romantic and marriage attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of Black middle class women for several compelling reasons. First, Black women’s sexuality, romantic identities, and patterns of family formation were regarded as flawed for several decades. In 1965, Daniel Moynihan wrote, “The Negro family, battered and harassed by discrimination, injustice, and uprooting, is in the deepest trouble.” More than 50 years later, the sentiment behind Moynihan’s claim is well
founded. Moynihan (1965) introduced the concept of the “tangle of pathology” to describe the familial lives of Black Americans. Moynihan (1965) wrote:

In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is to out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well.

Moynihan blamed the “reversed roles of Negro husband and wife” for increases in childhood delinquency among Black youth. He argued that this reversal in Black family structure and the corresponding delinquency among youth were directly associated with Black female led households. Esteemed slightly higher than its poor and working class counterparts, Moynihan described middle class Blacks as redeemable but also inextricably bound to and influenced by their poor brothers and sisters. Moynihan (1965) wrote, “…The children of middle-class Negros often a not must grow up in, or next to the slums,” and are therefore “constantly exposed to the pathology of the disturbed group and constantly in danger of being drawn into it.” In other words, Moynihan distinguishes between the styles of life of poor and middle class Blacks, and at the same time, articulates a belief that middle-class Blacks are subject to the perceived negative influences of their economically disadvantaged counterparts. This pathology referred to the weakening of the Black family structure and the rise of the matriarchal Black family. With a slightly more optimistic tone, Jenkins (2007) writes, “…Moynihan again notes that the Black middle class ‘have managed to break out of the tangle of
pathology and to establish themselves as stable, effective units, living according to patterns of American society in general”. Again, Black families and Black women’s identities and existence had long been characterized as deficient in nature irrespective of class standing.

Second, scholars have identified “the marriage squeeze”, which refers to the decrease in the number of eligible romantic partners, a trend that persists for low-income and middle class Black women, as a factor involved in poor marriage outcomes for Black women (Franklin 2010). A simplified version of this explanation posits that Black women will view male unemployment as a deal breaker and only view an eligible, employed Black male as a potential or suitable romantic partner. A man’s eligibility and employment are seen as the primary forces that influence women’s partnering decisions (Wilson 1997). Undoubtedly, the process of establishing, maintaining, or dissolving casual dating relationships or partnership formation is far more complex and nuanced than this argument suggests, and the intricacies of romantic partnering should be explored among well-resourced, highly educated Black women.

Extant literature on Black women’s romantic and emotional lives does not identify the ideals, expectations, internal and external negotiations, behaviors, and decision-making involved in the romantic partnering process for Black middle class women. In other words, much of what we know about romantic relationships among Black women relies on a simple structural explanation for partnering. In fact, to borrow
from relationship scientists, who seek to understand the ways that the structure and trajectory of relationships, how relationships work, and the outcomes of these relationships, they suggest that relationships are influenced by the personal characteristics that individuals bring to their romantic relationships and the context in which these relationships unfold (Finkel, Simpson, & Eastwick, 2017). As such, we should consider personal characteristics beyond employment and eligibility in analyses of Black women’s relational experiences. Scholars do not know, however, what factors or qualities Black middle class women consider in evaluating a potential or current romantic partner and how these women make decisions throughout the partnering process.

Fourth, scholars have not established whether the strategies or processes involved in the romantic partnering process for Black middle class women are similar to or different from low-income or non-college educated Black women. The dominant narrative in sociology about Black women and romantic partnering is derived almost entirely from the experiences of poor or low-income Black women. We simply do not know if Black women who have more education, higher social status, and greater economic resources have different relational experiences than Black women with less education and fewer financial or social resources. We cannot assume that the romantic or relational experiences of middle class Black women are the same as poor women. Though possibly overlapping at points, the marriage markets, men’s educational
attainment and unemployment, and their own personal educational, social, and financial knowledge and resources are different. Thus, this study will test the assumption that Black middle class women are role models for other Black women. A 2013 National Center for Education Statistics report found that Black women are enrolled in colleges and universities at a higher rate than any other racial/gender group including white women, Asian women and white men. Of course, this means that Black women are also outpacing black men in terms of educational attainment. This finding has consequences for Black women’s ability to partner with similarly educated Black men. Certainly middle class Black women can serve as educational or economic role models, but it is unclear whether they can also act as relational or intimate role models.

Fifth, this study will investigate long-standing assumptions and stereotypes about marriage and the value associated with it among contemporary generations. For example, scholars do not know with certainty how this millennial subgroup views marriage. Specifically, it is unknown whether marriage is a desired goal, a capstone to a successful and fulfilled personal and professional life, a permanent arrangement or a more fluid institution, and if Black middle class women are open to or desire other forms of long-term romantic partnering. Related to this point, scholars do not know how and why Black middle class women pursue romantic relationships, marriage, or other romantic interactions today, whether this pursuit is strategic or passive, and what beliefs they have about relationships or meanings they ascribe to marriage. Scholars find
distinct patterns of and beliefs about marriage among older cohorts of Americans (e.g. silents, baby boomers, and generation xers). For silents (born between 1928 and 1946), marriage was a normative, enduring aspect of the transition to adulthood in the United States with most men and women being married by their early twenties. Baby boomers (born between 1946 and 1965) viewed marriage as an institution in which norms were questioned, and increasingly individuals valued personal fulfillment more than tradition or duty to a marital relationship (Pruchno 2012). During the 1960s and 1970s, when many baby boomers transitioned out of marital relationships, divorce rates rose sharply in the United States. In a study of views on marriage and parenthood, 42 percent of generation xers reported that having a successful marriage was one of the most important things in life, whereas only 32 percent of millennials reported this sentiment (Pew Research Center 2011).

In the sections that follow, I review historical and contemporary literatures on the Black middle class. First, I explore early investigations into the Black middle class, Black marriages and families, and the unique familial and relational experiences of middle-class Black women. Next, I outline the structural and behavioral factors that have been considered in examinations of Black women’s dating and marital opportunities in the United States.
1.2 Background

In the spring of 1896, W.E.B. DuBois was commissioned by the University of Pennsylvania to undertake a study on the “Negro Problem” (Bowser 1997). Two years later, in 1898, DuBois outlined the first comprehensive description of Black social classes in the United States. According to Landry (1997), DuBois conducted a survey in 1902 that examined the lives of an upper class group of blacks in Athens, GA. Included in his analyses were individuals who had “risen above the masses economically and socially”. In his early writings, DuBois theorized that the educated, elite blacks uplifted the entire race. DuBois was one of few scholars who acknowledged and considered class diversity among Black Americans in his scholarship; E. Franklin Frazier was the other. In Black Bourgeoisie, Frazier described the development of the black middle class through educational attainment in missionary schools and occupational diversification in the 20th century (Landry & Marsh 2011).

Scholars have labored for decades to determine which Black Americans should be considered middle class (Bowser 2007; Frazier 1957; Lacy 2007; Landry 1987; Oliver & Shapiro 1995; Pattillo-McCoy 2013; Wilson 1978). Typically, quantitative definitions of the middle class are based on four variables, used either independently or in combination: education, homeownership (as a measure of wealth), income, and occupation (Drake & Horace 1962; Feagin & Sikes 1994; Frazier 1957; Landry 1987; Oliver & Shapiro 1995; Tomaskovic-Devey, Thomas & Johnson 2005). In recent
qualitative literature, the Black middle class specifically is operationalized by education, occupational prestige, per person income and wealth (Landry & Marsh 2011). To operationalize class standing in this study, respondents holding at least a bachelor’s degree are classified as middle class (Marsh, Darity, Cohen, Casper, & Salters 2007; Landry & Marsh 2011).

The Black middle class looks different than the middle class broadly. Lacy (2007) argues that there is a distinct “Black class structure”. This is a structure in which lower-middle-class Blacks are concentrated at the bottom of the class structure. Middle-class-Blacks, who more closely resemble middle class whites, make up the second group of middle class Blacks. This group is comprised of doctors, lawyers, accountants, engineers, and corporate managers. Patillo (2007) contends that middle-class status is complicated for Black Americans. She claims that middle-class Blacks still face structural racism that has implications for Blacks’ health outcomes, income and wealth accumulation, and other key indicators of middle class standing. It is well established in social science literature that middle-class Blacks are largely segregated by race. As such, scholars consistently find that middle class Blacks are more likely to live in or in close proximity to neighborhoods with more poverty, higher crime rates, and greater access to “street influences” than middle class whites (Massey & Denton 1993).

In more recent decades, some scholarly attention has been dedicated to the study of middle class Blacks’ educational, employment, and status achievements (Wilson,
1987; Collins, 1997; Lacy 2007), experiences with racism, discrimination, and residential segregation (Williams, Neighbors, & Jackson 2003; Pager & Shepherd 2008; Massey & Denton 1993; Moore 2009). Most of these studies focus on families, specifically traditional heterosexual families and their experiences along the continuum of middle class standing (Feagin & Sikes 1994; Lacy 2007; 2004; Patillo 2013). Many of these studies examine the aspirations, accomplishments, and challenges of middle-income Black families, but few focus on the experiences of Black women exclusively. The scant scholarship that exists on this subject primarily focuses on Black middle class women’s academic and professional accomplishments. Scholars consistently find that this group often overcomes significant challenges and barriers to attain middle class standing, and the challenges they face are structured by interlocking systems of racial and gender oppression (Epstein 1973; Landry 1987; Collins 1990; Collins 1997).

Bowser (1997) argues that Black women have “a particular story to tell,” in part, because Blacks enter and experience the middle class differently from whites. Whites who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to attain middle class status standing and remain there, while Blacks from similar socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to attain middle class standing and less likely to stay there due to racial inequality in the allocation of key socioeconomic resources including racial disparities in earnings, intergenerational wealth, access to high quality educational resources, residential segregation, and racism in hiring practices (Oliver & Shapiro, 2006; Pager,
2003; Pager & Shepard, 2008; Massey & Denton, 1988). When Blacks achieve middle class standing, Black middle class women simultaneously experience relative advantage in terms of their class standing and disadvantage with respect to their race and gender (Cole 2009). Black middle class women are praised for being highly educated and accomplished despite continuing to face significant everyday challenges including interpersonal and institutional racism, sexism, and discrimination.

While some scholars have investigated middle class Black women’s educational and professional successes, less attention has been paid to their intimate and romantic lives. Some empirical analysis of Black women’s roles as romantic partners and parents exists, but much of this research focuses on the experiences of low-income, economically disadvantaged women (Burton & Tucker 2009; Collins 2004; Higgenbotham & Weber 1992). As such, there are several questions that remain unanswered. What factors or processes influence Black middle class women’s attitudes, beliefs, and expectations about romantic or intimate relationships? How and what do Black women learn about love, dating, and romantic relationships from their parents and families? How do middle class Black women experience intimacy and romance as they occupy a social position uniquely characterized by relative class-advantage and race- and gender-disadvantage? How do Black women think about, engage in, and experience emotions in the context of romantic relationships? Is marriage a goal or capstone for middle class Black women, or do they aspire to some other form of romantic partnership? In the
section that follows, I discuss the extant research on the romantic, intimate lives of the Black middle class and the ways that social scientists, in particular sociologists, can enlighten the way into this area of scholarly inquiry.

1.2.1 The Intimate Lives of The Black Middle Class

Dill (1998b) writes, “The American family has been best defined in a number of ways, but African American women and their families have never quite met the mark. Black women have historically been left far outside the articulation of women as wives and mothers.” In response to this silence, a small number of scholars have recently initiated an exploration into the intimate lives, relational opportunities, and the romantic and reproductive outcomes of middle class Black women. For example, Clarke (2011) investigated the romantic and reproductive decision-making of Black middle class women and attributes their disadvantages in family formation and romantic partnering to racial discrimination and inequality. Through Clarke’s intersectional analyses, she found that these inequalities are connected to women’s sexual and reproductive decisions, performance of class identity, and efforts to avoid racial stigma.

Sociologists are uniquely positioned to contribute to the scholarly discourse on Black middle class women’s sexual and romantic agency, romantic partnerships, and patterns of union formation. Sociologists, social demographers specifically, study population composition and change, and recently demographers have examined the
ways that technology and the family influence personal, familial, and romantic relationships. At the same time, social psychologists study social relationships generally, and also have an understanding of the influence of social institutions, public policy, culture and other macro forces on romantic relationships and romantic partnering. In addition, sociologists who study race and gender, and take critical race approaches seriously, carefully consider the ways that romantic relationship processes may reproduce inequality between men and women, how the scholarly focus on heterosexual relationships may advance heteronormative expectations of romantic relationships in the Black community, and the structural aspects of gender, including the division of labor at home, caregiving responsibility, and power are closely related to interactions between romantic partners. Furthermore, critical race scholars have frequently called for more examinations of romantic relationships at the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality. In popular culture, the romantic lives of Black women, and in particular Black middle class women have driven television sitcom plots and illuminated for broader American audiences the idealized romantic lives of middle class Black women.

Still, the study presented here is the first to systematically address the questions -

- What influences Black middle class women’s attitudes, beliefs, and expectations about romantic relationships? What and how do Black women learn about love, dating, and romantic relationships from their parents and families? How do middle class Black women experience intimacy and romance? How do Black women think about, engage
in, and experience emotions in romantic relationships? Do middle class Black women aspire to marriage?

Existing studies of intimate or romantic partnering behavior examine the preferred traits of romantic partners (Stewart, Stinnett, & Rosenfeld 2000), actions or behaviors that are demonstrated during the initial stages of getting to know a new potential partner (O'Sullivan, Cheng, Harris, & Brooks-Gunn 2007), factors that contribute to respondents happiness in romantic relationships (Arriaga, 2001), and reasons partners give to become sexually intimate, live together, or marry (Guzzo 2014; Manning & Smock 2002; Meier 2007; Sassier & McNally 2004). Partnerships or relationships may be casual romantic trysts, short-lived romantic explorations, temporary intimate unions, life-long partnerships, or romantic relationships that lead to enduring marriages. Henceforth, the terms partnering or relationships will be used to refer to thoughts and behaviors involved in the initiation, formation, development, evaluation, and maintenance of a romantic or intimate relationships. The present study identifies and elaborates the processes involved in middle class Black women’s romantic relationship formation with careful attention to the ways that this group’s race, class, and gender intersect to structure this process.
1.2.2 Marriage Patterns and Changing Attributes of Black Women in the United States

Over the last fifty years, the structure and meaning of marriage and romantic partnering has changed dramatically in the United States. According to the Pew Research Center, “The share of never-married adults has gone up for all major racial and ethnic groups in the U.S., but the rate of increase has been most dramatic among Blacks.” In fact, it was estimated that just 70 percent of Black women born in 1954 will marry in their lifetimes, whereas 86 percent of Black men and 90 percent of White men and women will marry in their lifetimes (Rodgers & Thornton 1985). Moreover, while a white woman in America can expect to spend 43 percent of her life as a married woman, a Black woman can expect to spend only 22 percent of her life married (Coontz 1992).

According to the Pew Research Center (2012), 36 percent of Blacks in the United States ages 25 and older have never been married in 2012, an increase from 9 percent in 1960. In comparison, in 2012, 16 percent of whites had never been married, compared to 8 percent in 1960. Approximately 24 percent of never-married young adults in the United States ages 25 to 34 currently cohabitate, or live with a romantic partner, and unknown percentages are engaged in some form of romantic interaction or union. Despite significant changes in marriage rates over time, many never-married or divorced young adults and adults are not “single” (Current Population Survey: Pew Research 2013).
Several decades ago, scholars identified potential reasons for the decline in marriage rates among Black Americans and have called for more substantive research on the romantic lives of Black men and women. Scholars argue that Blacks are marrying less, because there are significantly fewer romantically available Black men than there are available Black women, a scarcity of employed or “marriageable” Black men, and incarceration rates and alcohol and drug addiction among Black men (Davis, Emerson, & Williams 1997; Wilson 1987).

Alongside these changes in marriage and limitations in the pool of marriageable Black men, the educational, academic, and professional opportunities for Black women have significantly increased. Two thirds of all college degrees earned by Blacks in the United States are earned by Black women. At the same time, however, most Black women still ascribe to traditional family and gender values which suggest that men should hold as much or more education, economic resources, and professional status than their wives (Dixon 2009). While Black middle class women’s values are undoubtedly shaped by their experiences in adulthood, some of their beliefs and values about marriage and family are also shaped in childhood.

There are notable social and economic inequalities in the relationships between Black men and Black women. Cohn, Passel, Wang, & Livingston (2011) found that individuals with lower levels of education and racial and ethnic minorities are least likely to ever marry. In fact, among the major racial and ethnic groups in the United
States, the rates of new marriages declined for all groups in 2009-2010. The same report found that nearly two-thirds of American adults with college degrees are married, whereas those just about 50 percent of individuals with a high school education or some high school education are married.

The Brookings Institute (2011) reported that the proportion of Black college graduates aged 25 to 35 who have never married is 60 percent, compared to 38 percent for white college-educated women. Black women who are college graduates are more likely to marry husbands who have less education (58 percent) than college educated white women (48 percent) (The Brookings Institute, 2015). Among low-income Black men and women, the decline in marriage is associated with a lack of trust between men and women (Burton, Cherlin, Winn, Estacion, & Holder-Taylor 2009).

1.2.3 Modern Romance and the Black Experience

Romance refers to feelings that foster closeness, bondedness, and connectedness to a partner (Sternberg, 1987), “a state of intense longing for union with another – with deep friendship, easy companionship and sharing of common interests”, and intensity, engagement, and sexual desire (Acevedo & Aron, 2009). Intimacy is characterized by closeness through openness and verbal disclosure of private or personal experiences and emotional expression, and physical and psycho- emotional intimacy (Layder; 2009; Cancian, 1986; 1994). Many of these qualities or characteristics of intimacy and
relationship maintenance are based on the romantic lives of middle class whites. To that end, scholars have affirmed that love, sexuality, and familial commitment are legitimate in the context of heteronormative, white middle-class relationships and marriages and largely ignore how intimacy and romance are enacted between Black couples.

Conceptualizing romance in the 21st century is based on a complex interplay of race, class, gender, privilege, and power. Scholars have examined the intimate lives of economically successful or privileged women from the perspective of modern parenting, progressive definitions of the division of labor in a household, and ways that middle and upper class women outsource day-to-day responsibilities associated with family life as they seek to balance work and home (Coontz 2005; Hochschild 2003; 2012). In terms of romantic relationships, most of the scholarly research on the romantic lives of the middle class has focused primarily on love and sexuality in the context of white, heterosexual, marital relationships.

In addition to examinations of middle class white marriages and relationships, some scholars have examined the intimate, romantic lives of economically disadvantaged women. Burton (2014) argues that romance takes on several different forms for poor women, including perhaps most importantly, “being chosen”. Economically disadvantaged women also identify romantic actions such as “exchanging statements of love, cuddling, and public adoration...sexual activity, texting about erotic desires, and gifts of large sums of money” (Burton 2014).
While social science researchers have focused on Black middle class women’s roles as workers and caregivers, they have largely ignored their sensuality, sexuality, and agency in romance and intimate relationships. Black women’s sexuality and romantic lives have not, however, been ignored by authors, scholars, and performers in the Humanities. Fiction writers, poets, essayists, singers, songwriters, and filmmakers have long contemplated and explored the intimate lives of Black women. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) uses blues songs as a source of insight into the lives and worldviews of Black women. Other scholars read the religious songs written by Black women as expressions of their struggles and conceptions of faith (Gilkes 2001). Nella Larsen’s Quicksand (1928) and Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937) are early 20th century novels authored by Black women that explored themes including race and racism, colorism, social status, personal and sexual fulfillment, gender roles, marriage, and family. With respect to romance and romantic partnering specifically, Black vocalists including Etta James, Bessie Smith, Chaka Khan, Aretha Franklin, Adina Howard, and Beyoncé’ have articulated black women’s desire for romantic, sensual, and sexual intimacies with their lovers. Moreover, Shumway (2003) argued that the legacy of slavery and racial oppression influence the ways that African American writers and filmmakers depict love, marriage, and sexuality in their screenplays and films.

While sociologists have largely disregarded Black middle class women’s romantic partnering practices and processes, or communicated the message that all
Blacks are the same by implying that their romantic experiences are homogenous, scholars have explored the processes associated with courtship and dating for other racial groups. Scholars suggested that there is a sequential, standard progression of romantic relationships (Reiss 1960; 1980). First, new romantic partners experience a feeling of ease in their interaction with each other or rapport. As the couple continues to get to know each other, their ability to communicate becomes easier and they begin to reveal themselves to one another through self-revelation. After self-revelation, couples begin to develop mutual dependency or beginning to rely on one another and feel like a unit. Finally, if a couple accomplishes the last stage -- intimacy need fulfillment, the interaction can transition into an official relationship. Schmitt, Shackelford, & Buss (2001) suggested that the earliest stages of partner interest and selection are based on initial attraction and the different techniques individuals use to attract partners (Clark, Shaver, & Abrahams 1999). The literature on dating and courtship often examines patterns and processes among white college students and middle class whites and focuses on the ideal or goal relationship that an individual has entering into a potential relationship. This study will seek to establish whether the Black women’s romantic relationships follow this linear pattern, or perhaps some other more indirect, labyrinthine path to relationships and romantic fulfillment.

In the sections that follow, I detail the extant literature on Black women and romantic partnering. Specifically, I give a brief overview of the structural and behavior
factors that influence Black women’s relational and romantic experiences and opportunities.

1.2.4 Structural Factors

Structural factors have been prominently considered in analyses of Black women’s dating and marital opportunities in the United States. Scholars argue that marriage-market conditions, in particular, the proportion of economically attractive Black men affect Black women’s marital prospects (Lichter, LeClere, & McLaughlin 1991; Wilson, 1987; Tucker & Taylor, 1989), the ratio of never married Black men to Black women in the U.S., marital delay, and the influence of out of wedlock childbirths, single motherhood, and alternative family formations on the romantic partnering options of middle-class Black women. Taking into account the structural factors that influence romantic partnering, I focus on why these factors are important for understanding the romantic partnering practices and processes for Black women in the United States.

1.2.4.1 “The Marriage Squeeze”

As mentioned earlier, the marriage squeeze, a term coined in the 1960s, which refers to a decrease in the availability of marriage partners among women in the “baby boom” era, is a phenomenon often cited as an important factor that influences the dating and marital opportunities of Black women. The trend of Black women delaying marriage was first identified in the 1970s. In the original studies, scholars found that
Black women tended to marry men who were “significantly older, had lower educational attainment, and were more often previously married”. More recently, scholars have found that Black women have more restricted fields of eligible men than white females. Several scholars have identified that there are simply fewer available Black men for every available Black woman in the United States (Glick, Heer, and Beresford, 1963; Schoen, 1983; Glick 1981; Tucker and Taylor (1989), Black article; Taylor, Chatters, Tucker, Lewis, 1990).

Scholars find that there are several factors that create the conditions for a marriage squeeze among Black middle class women. Higher rates of incarceration, poor health outcomes, and unemployment among Black men, coupled with interracial marriage by Black men to non-black partners are associated with the constrained number of available Black male partners (Harris & Miller 2006; Alexander, 2003; Crowder & Tolnay, 2000; Williams & Collins, 2001). In addition, women from all racial backgrounds report desiring to marry partners at or above their social and economic class or status. As Black women are more likely to restrict their dating and marriage prospects to Black men, they risk marrying partners who are not at their same socioeconomic class standing or not marrying at all as there are fewer available partners with comparable levels of educational and occupational attainment. In addition, marital timing has changed over the last 60 years. In the past, Blacks married earlier than whites in the U.S., and this trend has now reversed (Cherlin, 1981; Tucker and Taylor, 1989).
1.2.4.2 Differences in Economic Opportunities between Black Men and Women

Several studies have concluded that the economic opportunities of Black men have a significant impact on the partnering practices and marital outcomes of Black women in the United States. These studies conclude that partners who are less economically equipped, older women, and Blacks with less education have fewer marital options based on the “marital opportunity structure” (Tucker & Taylor, 1989). Changes in the structure of the American economy, specifically a decline in manufacturing jobs, has led to a decline in Black males labor force participation rate. As a consequence, the marital behavior of American women, Black and white, has been influenced by the declining economic circumstances of young men (see Oppenheimer 1988, 2000; Bennett et. al. 1989).

Due to significant changes in the economy, scholars have argued that Black women do not view Black men who are not gainfully employed as good candidates for marriage. The proportion of employed Black men declined from 80 percent in 1930 to 56 percent in 1983, and more recently, in 2009 the rate was 66.2 percent (Wilson, 1987; The Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). Scholars actually contend that Black women have lower marital rates than white women, because the economic incentives to marry are lower (Lichter, LeClere, & McLaughlin, 1991). It is possible that more Black women are less likely to pursue marriage as a capstone as they come to terms with the economic realities with this type of romantic union. For men who are employed, Black middle
class husbands are likely to have lower incomes than white middle class husbands (Landry & Jendrek, 1978) and as a consequence, middle class Black women work primarily because of economic necessity, not for the fulfillment of personal financial interests. In fact, Black women’s financial contribution to a household is often required to maintain a middle class lifestyle. Relative to white women, Black women are more likely to be employed, and employed full time, because they are not likely to be deterred from working by their husband’s incomes.

1.2.4.3 Employment Opportunities of Black Men

According to Clark-Nicholas and Gray-Little (1991), economic factors significantly influence the stability and quality of marriages. In terms of marriage specifically, studies have found that Blacks expect men to provide economic support and for women to have more social and economic opportunities. Black women are more likely to report a desire or preference for their husbands or partners to have primary economic responsibility than white women (Taylor, Tucker, & Mitchell-Kernan 1999). In fact, economic role behavior among married Blacks resembles that of middle-class whites.

Ruggles (1997) argued that economic factors are essential to the formation and maintenance of unions between Black Americans. According to the Record Share of Americans Have Never Married Report (2014), accounting for the employment status of
Black men, the pool of never-married young men shrinks significantly, especially for never-married Black women. The report indicated that among never-married African Americans between the ages of 25 and 34, there are 92 Black men for every 100 Black women. After accounting for employment, there are actually only 51 never-married young Black men for every 100 never-married young Black women in the United States. Massey (2008) suggested that Black men’s employment outcomes, which are worse than any other racial group in the United States, are associated with the effects of “racial discrimination, arrest records, and, for older men, weaker educational credentials”.

When eligible, employed men outnumber women or become a “scarce resource”, men hold what Dickinson (1993) referred to as the emotional power in a relationship. They do not have to commit, because they can always find a new partner. This pattern of romantic engagement is consequential for Black women, as Black women are more likely to date and marry Black men than men from any other racial category in the United States.

1.3 Behavioral Factors

In addition to the impact that structural forces have on declines in marriage among Black women, behavioral factors including the enactment of changing social norms are also implicated. Changing social norms associated with contemporary dating and courtship, union formation, and marital behaviors are demonstrated in several
ways. Hooking up, delaying marriage, increased and prolonged singleness, higher rates of marital instability and divorces, non-marital cohabitation, and the loosening ties between marriage and childbearing and childrearing suggest that Americans aspirations and attitudes towards romantic partnering have changed significantly over time (Guzzo 2014; Raley 2001; Cherlin 2004; 2009). Changes in attitudes towards marriage, changing relationship arrangements including cohabitation, out of wedlock childbearing and multiple partner fertility, and general cultural changes contribute to declines in marriage among all Americans and distinctly influence the marriage patterns of Black women.

Overall, scholars find that romantic aspirations present early in life. As such, scholars have examined the future orientation around relationships, marriage, and familial relationships among adolescents in the United States. According to McCabe and Barnett (2000), compared to adolescent whites who felt more optimistic about their future romantic and familial relationships, adolescent Blacks were more detailed, optimistic, and realistic about their future careers and felt that they had more control over careers than relationships.

A substantial body of literature has explored the relationship between marriage attitudes and relationship quality. Research has shown that romantic partners who feel positively about interdependence in committed relationships are more likely to act in a committed manner and invest effort and time into relationships (Riggio & Weiser, 2008). Riggio and Weiser (2008) conclude that positive attitudes about divorce are associated
with negative relationship outcomes. Individuals who hold negative attitudes about marriage are less likely to demonstrate interdependence with romantic partners. These attitudes could influence or guide perceptions and behavior in personal relationships and are predictive of less investment in romantic relationships (Amato & DeBoer, 2001; Fletcher & Thomas, 1996). It is important to note that young adults who report experiencing exposure to high parental conflict experience greater relationship conflict, and individuals with divorced parents hold more negative attitudes about marriage (Riggio & Weiser 2008).

1.3.1 Alternatives to Marriage: Cohabitation

The notion that cohabitation is a precursor to marriage has been challenged in recent literature. Scholars find that many couples that choose to cohabit do so because of changes in employment or out of convenience (Guzzo, 2006), or in response to an unplanned pregnancy (Reed, 2006). Compared to white women, Black American women have higher overall probabilities of cohabiting (Schoen & Owens, 1992) and are less likely than white women to marry the men they cohabit with, even though they hold similar expectations of transitioning from cohabitation to marriage as white women (Raley & Bumpass, 2003). Cohabitating does not necessarily involve the commitment or forethought that one might associate with the decision for two romantically involved adults to live together.
According to Shumlan and Connolly (2013), the process associated with romantic partners deciding to live together is a gradual one that involves slowly moving personal possessions into a partner’s home or gradually increasing the number and frequency of nights staying over. They found that nearly 50 percent of cohabitating partners did not discuss cohabitating before moving in together, and the timing of life course events is associated with cohabitating and marital unions. Job loss is associated with an increase in the odds of cohabitation. In fact, to compare the processes associated with cohabitation and the decision to marry, Duvander (1999) finds relatively economically and socially stable individuals make the choice to marry, whereas cohabitation is a choice that is made by those whose lives are often characterized by uncertainty or instability (Guzzo, 2006).

1.3.2 Out-of-Wedlock Childbearing

In addition to economic considerations, out of wedlock childbearing limits women’s marriage market participation in a few ways. First, it diminishes women’s schooling and employment opportunities, which in turn may diminish their attractiveness to potential partners (Hoffman & Foster 1999). Second, men may be unwilling to assume the parenting and financial responsibilities for children from previous non-marital relationships (Lichter & Graefe 2001). Scholars found that single mothers who do not immediately or eventually marry their child’s father are half as
likely to marry than women who have no children, and if they do marry, they are more likely to marry men with fewer economic resources. According to Edin and Kefalas (2005), if the quality of potential mates is lower than is desirable, single mothers may prioritize their roles as mothers and focus less attention on getting married.

At the same time, children from previous relationships also influences women’s perceptions of men as viable partners. The marriage market is increasingly comprised of people who have been married and/or have children. Manlove, Logan, Ikramullah, & Holcombe (2008) conclude that Black parents are twice as likely as compared to whites to experience multiple-partner fertility, and younger fathers and Black and Hispanic fathers have greater odds of experiencing nonmarital multiple-partner fertility as compared multiple-partner fertility involving at least one marital birth. Women are reluctant to partner with men in which they may be expected to assume responsibility for non-biological children or arrangements in which men’s resources are shared with another household (Waller & McLanahan, 2005). Women who are willing to marry a man who has children are positively impacted in the relationship market (Goldscheider, Kaufman, & Sassler, 2009). In addition, scholars suggest that the prevalence of multiple partner fertility among Blacks may “co-occur with the decline in marriage” (Mincy, 2001). Much of the research mentioned in this section focuses on the experiences of poor women of color, and it is hard to know whether Black middle class women with more
social and material resources would approach partnering and motherhood from a similar perspective. This study seeks to address the gaps in the literature.

1.3.3 Cultural and Value Shifts

Another behavioral factor that influences the formation of successful relationships are cultural value shifts that emphasize personal fulfillment, individualism, and self-realization. According to some scholars, these value shifts contribute to feelings of a lack of trust and an inability to make and maintain commitments. Dickinson (1993) argued that the expectations for the family now include sexual fulfillment, intimacy, and companionship. These changes in expectations associated with individual and familial happiness can make it more difficult for romantic relationships and marriages to work (Dickinson 1993). Harper (2010) found that an increase in individualistic attitudes is associated with a rise in negative or pessimistic attitudes toward traditional marriages. In Western Europe and the United States, the average age of marriage for women has increased over time, and scholars find that women prioritize career and work as much as childbearing and family formation (Adler, 2004; Goldstein and Kenney, 2001). Cherlin put forth a theory of what he calls “individualized marriage”. In his view, married men and women are increasingly interested in and derive satisfaction from “the development of their own sense of self and the expression of their feelings, as opposed to the satisfaction they (gain) through
building a family and playing the roles of spouse and parent” (2004: 852). In past generations, the primary goals or functions of marriage included “securing economic support from a legally recognized partner, legitimizing sexual relationships or having children” (Santore 2008). It is important to examine how Black women, specifically those with the credentials and resources to focus on self-actualization, internalize and respond to broad increases in individualism.

From this point, the dissertation proceeds as follows. In Chapter Two, I explain the theories that guide this study – symbolic interactionism, social exchange theory, Goffman’s presentation of self, and intersectionality theory.

In Chapter Three, “Socializing Black Daughters: Messaging About Romantic Relationships in Black Families”, I examine the two-part role Black parents play in socializing their daughters. First, Black girls are privy to their parent or parents’ marriage or romantic interactions. In other words, scholars have highlighted the ways that children engage in a process of observational learning when they observe their parents’ interactions (Booth, Crouter, & Snyder, 2015). I argue that this learning shapes how respondents think about and engage in romantic relationships. Respondents either seek to replicate the kinds of relationships their parents have, adopt different forms of romantic partnering in light of their parents’ relational shortcomings, or subconsciously repeat similar patterns to their parents in choosing a romantic partner and using certain relational strategies in the relationship.
Second, Black parents transmit particular race and class-based beliefs about romantic relationships. Some Black parents give their daughters practical advice about choosing a partner. While many are largely silent about romantic relationships, others are concerned with upward mobility and their daughters’ ability to maintain or improve their social class through educational investments, career advancement, and financial independence. At the same time, there is evidence that some Black parents transfer cautious, negative beliefs about men and marriage to their daughters. All in all, Black women receive little to no guidance about how to establish trusting, loving, healthy romantic connections.

In Chapter Four, “Emotions, Nonlinearity, and Uncertainty: Emergent Relational Strategies in Disadvantaged Marriage Markets”, I describe the nonlinearity development of romantic interactions including extended non-commitments, break-up to make-up relationships, and unsteady long-term relationships among Black middle class women. While extant research describes the relationship formation process as linear in nature, with clearly defined stages (initiation, evaluation, maintenance, permanence or dissolution) (Bryant & Conger 2002), I show that Black middle class women’s romantic interactions are not so neat and clearly defined. In fact, imperfection and movement characterize many of these relationships. For some, the lines or boundaries at different stages of a relationship process are blurred, the expectations and conditions can be unclear, and even when women articulate certain relational thresholds, these thresholds
shift based on their beliefs, cognitions, evaluations, and the actions or events involved in the context of the relationship.

In Chapter Five, “happy-ish: Unpacking Middle Class Black Women’s Marital Satisfaction”, I examine the attitudes, beliefs, and actions that are associated with Black women finding happiness and contentment in romantic relationships. This concept is important as researchers highlight the proportion of Black women in the United States that are unmarried and/or childless. In recent years, greater attention has been paid to the concept of “Black Love” and television shows, musicians, and artists have encouraged Blacks to embrace and promote positive representations of Black couples and families. In particular, I examine the process of relationship formation among happily partnered respondents (boyfriend/girlfriend, cohabitating, and married respondents and their partners), opportunities and challenges in the context of these relationships, the decision-making around choosing to commit to and grow these partnerships, and Black women’s emotions, feelings, and thoughts about these processes.

1.4 About The Study

Considering the factors I described above, the subject population for the study includes Black American women who hold at least a Bachelor’s degree. From March 24, 2017 to May 29, 2017, I recruited and interviewed Black women between the ages of 30
and 40 years old for this study. I selected this age range for two reasons. First, there is evidence that the age of first marriages has increased for all women; this delay is most prominent among Black women. According to the US Decennial Census (1890-2000) and the American Community Survey (2010), the median age at first marriage for Black women is 30 years old. In addition, by the age of 35, approximately 25 percent of Black women will have never married, and by their early 40s, a lower proportion of Black women will ever been married than white women. In 2010, the Pew Research Center reported that the mean age for first-time births increased for all racial groups. Second, college educated women tend to have children later in life, because they wait until their schooling is complete to start a family. As such, it is important to understand how Black women in this critical age range and developmental period think about romantic partnering and relationships.

A snowball sample of Black women was drawn from educational networks associated with three academic institutions: The University of Michigan (public university), Harvard University (private university), and several Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) including Spelman College (private), Howard University (public), and Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (public). I accessed the graduate and professional organizations to which women currently belong to including, but not limited to, NPHC (National Pan Hellenic Council), NABA (National Association of Black Accountants), NBMA (National Black MBA Association),
NSBE (National Association of Black Engineers), ABWP (Association of Black women Physicians), and the respective Black Alumni and Black Graduate Student Networks associated with each college or university. The individuals who were recruited to participate in the study do not necessarily know each other, but all are successful, professional women connected to one or more of these networks. Middle-class Black women are a “hard to reach” population in academic research. While some hard to reach populations are associated with negative stigma, such as drug users or sex workers, middle class Black women are hard to access, in part, due to their relative social and economic position. Many of these women are highly educated, professional, and have overcome significant obstacles or barriers to achieve their personal and professional success. In light of this reality, these women are not necessarily motivated by a nominal participant fee ($25) to participate in a research study. I had some concerns that I would have difficulty securing respondents who would cooperate if they felt as if their anonymity may be violated by their participation in this study. As such, I felt as if it were important to use academic and professional connections to recruit respondents.

To generate additional study participants and out of genuine interest from respondents, I received referrals from colleagues and study participants’ personal and professional connections. In some instances, these women attended the same undergraduate institutions, pledged the same sorority, worked in the same industry, simply crossed paths or became friends as working professionals. In an attempt to keep
them as anonymous to one another and to the readers of this study, I obscure any information related to their personal relationships, location, or institutional or professional associations that might easily identify them.

Primary data collection involved one-time, in-depth qualitative interviews with the respondents. All of the women I interviewed are either single, married, divorced, or cohabitating. Some respondents are mothers, others have aspirations to have their own children and some do not. Thirty-three were unmarried women including three who are currently engaged and/or cohabitating and 19 were married women. Fourteen respondents are biological mothers and/or stepmothers or expecting their first child within three months of the interview date.

My aim was to explore the differences between unmarried and married Black middle class women and to examine whether their articulation of the relationship process was similar or different. Moreover, I hoped to get a sense of whether married women and single women differed on some characteristics including beliefs or attitudes about romantic relationships, actions or decision-making in the context of committed relationships, or professional aspirations. In addition, I was interested in exploring differences in the romantic or relational experiences of upwardly mobile middle class Black women and women who grew up in firmly middle class families. Lastly, I wanted to understand how women, married and unmarried, thought about and made decisions around childbearing. In particular, I wanted to learn more about how they and their
partners decided to have children, and how the decision influenced the quality of their romantic relationship.

The centrality of social class, both in terms of family of origin and in terms of class destination, will become more salient later in the study. At a baseline, all of the women in the study hold at least a bachelor’s degree. Some respondents have completed law school, medical school, doctoral program, or master’s degree in business, while others have pursued careers in the arts and with non-profit organizations. While there is diversity among respondents in terms of education and occupation, these women are well educated and accomplished in their respective careers.

In all, I traveled to eight cities to conduct in-person interviews with fifty-two middle class Black women. Respondents resided in Washington D.C. (3), Atlanta (5), Detroit (9), Los Angeles (9), Chicago (5), Charlotte (1), Chapel Hill (3), Durham (1), and New York City (17).

\textbf{1.5 Data Collection}

I recruited respondents in two ways. First, I requested referrals from women who are current or past members of the aforementioned graduate or professional organizations. Second, as a member of the respective professional or graduate organizations, I reached out to members of these organizations directly by accessing either the membership directories provided by the academic institutions or professional
organizations or by contacting members of my personal network with connections to these organizations and associations.

Interviews covered topics including the type of family the respondent was raised in, respondents’ attitudes, beliefs, and expectations about romantic relationships, the role of motherhood in influencing romantic interactions, behaviors in the context of romantic interactions or relationships, the ways that being Black and female informs romantic relationship partnering, marriage and family, relational decision-making, and how women understand the sociocultural and sociohistorical issues that influence Black women’s perceptions of or engagement in romantic relationships.

Identifiable information collected during the in-person, audio-recorded interviews included demographic information and respondents’ descriptions of family history, romantic interactions and relationships, attitudes, values, beliefs, and social and organizational environments. Pseudonyms were assigned to each respondent and in the transcripts of audio-recorded interviews, field notes, and reflexive memos, and these transcriptions were stored in an IRB approved data storage system.
Table 1. Sample Characteristics and Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic of Sample</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>City of Residence</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atlanta</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detroit</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Los Angeles</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raleigh-Durham</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York City/New Jersey</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington D.C.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age (30-40)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-31</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32-33</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34-35</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36-37</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38-39</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marital Status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmarried</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Highest Level of Education (Respondent)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MBA</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JD</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MD</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Undergraduate College/University</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HBCU</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family Structure (Origin)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never Married</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remarried</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Paternal Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MBA</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JD</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MD</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Maternal Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Bachelor's        10        19%
Master’s         13        25%
MBA             2         4%
JD               0        --
MD              3         6%
PhD             5        12%

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding. In-depth interviews: N=52

1.6 Semi-Structured Interviews

Qualitative approaches emphasize interpretation and nuance. In order to understand how individuals make meaning of their experiences, in this case romantic interactions and partnering, the proper methodological procedure is in-depth interviews (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw 2011). Researchers use and interpret interviews, texts, and observation to seek a detailed analysis of process and/or meanings (Sprague 2016: 145). The purpose of in-depth interviews is to obtain people’s “witness accounts of the social world” and to encourage interviewees to reflect on their experiences or beliefs (Sprague 2016: 145). This allows a researcher to pay attention to the ways people actually speak in their own words and make choices based on their interpretations.

The semi-structured interviews were guided by questions from the interview protocol (see Appendix 1). While these questions will guide the interviews, the discussions will follow a “flexible format” where respondents are encouraged to “speak freely in their own terms” and offer insights not explicitly considered in the research instrument (Lofland & Lofland 2006:105). Any impressions and possible interpretations
from the interviews were recorded by hand in the form of brief context notes (Lareau, 1996).

Respondents decided when and where the interviews took place. Interviews were conducted in their homes, at local coffee shops or lounges, neighborhood restaurants, or in offices or workplaces and lasted approximately 1.5 hours to 2 hours, with a few interviews lasting a bit longer than expected. Each respondent was compensated $25.00 USD at the conclusion of the interview.

1.6.1 Data Collection Instruments

In order to collect data on this topic, qualitative data collection tools were used. For qualitative data collection, one in-depth qualitative interview guide was used (see Appendix B). In addition, respondents completed a personal background and demographic questionnaire (see Appendix C).

1.6.1.1 Interview Guide

The instrument contains items including parental interaction, parental advice about romantic partnering, respondent’s attitudes, aspirations, and experiences in romantic interactions, situations, and relationships, respondent and partner behaviors and actions in the context of initiating, engaging in, evaluating, and ending relationships and marriages, anticipated and actual trade-offs, compromises, and decision-making in the context of romantic relationships, and socio-cultural and socio-historical
perspectives on dating among Black women. Additional lines of questioning include work-life balance and perceptions of and experiences on social media.

1.6.1.2 Demographic Questionnaire

The demographic questionnaire is a two-page document respondents used to record their highest level of education, occupation, and income; their parents and grandparents highest level of education and occupation, and where they grew up and currently reside. They also provide detailed information about the college or university they attended and information about household income, wealth, and debt.

1.6.1.3 Collected Data: Interviews

Interviews were semi-structured, open-ended, and tape-recorded, and lasted, on average, approximately one and a half hours. These recordings were then transcribed verbatim in English. The interviews began with descriptive questions that focused on how respondent’s lives were going at the time of the interview and then transitioned into more in-depth questions that focused on more sensitive information. The interview questions were followed closely and probing questions were asked when responses were vague or unclear or in instances in which further elaboration was needed. For example, at the start of the interview, I asked questions like “How are you? And how have things been going?” In the section that followed, I asked respondents to tell me about their parents and the family they grew up in. Later, I asked questions such as,
“What kinds of men are you/were you attracted to? What are you looking for in a partner?

The diverse interview questions provided valuable information about respondents’ families of origin, romantic and relational experiences, and evaluations of current romantic involvement. Moreover, these lines of questions generated potential themes and helped me to understand how this group of highly successful Black women thinks about and engage in romantic relationships.

In addition to the transcribed interviews, I also created two to three page memos for each interview. In each memo I wrote a description of each respondent, general impression about each interview, the contextual features of the interview including where the interview was conducted and the extent to which each respondent seemed engaged with the interview process. In addition, I wrote exhaustive reflexive notes for each interview including detailed information about how I felt during the interview, notes of any awkwardness or discomfort, whether I felt well prepared for the conversation, and how my social location influenced the kinds of information the respondent shared with me during the interview.

Immediately after each interview, I listened to the audio recording and took copious notes throughout my re-listening to each interview. In particular, I identified what seemed more or less important at the time of the interview, sought to identify aspects of the interviews that I may have overlooked or over- or under-emphasized in
my initial notes, and generally took note of any key quotes, ideas, or themes that I thought I should return to during the data analysis process. In all, the data for the study took the form of the following: 1) transcribed semi-structured interviews; 2) a demographic questionnaire; 3) initial notes taken immediately after each in-person interview; and 4) a detailed memo about each audio-recorded interview.

1.7 Data Analysis

I used this primary data to identify patterns and emergent themes related to Black middle class women’s beliefs, attitudes, actions, and behaviors in the context of romantic situations in young adulthood. This data informed my understanding of how these women make sense of their own thoughts or cognitions about romance, love, partnering, and union formation and how their behaviors or actions either correspond to or deviate from these beliefs and attitudes. I explored how women conceptualize a good, healthy romantic relationship, and how they think about and make decisions during the romantic partnering process. I examined how romantic partnering differs for Black women who grew up firmly middle class, and those who are upwardly mobile or grew up working class and transitioned into the middle class by virtue of their own education, income, occupational prestige, and wealth.

In terms of class background, I categorized respondents as either upwardly mobile or middle class stable. Upwardly mobile refers to women for whom neither
parent was employed as a professional, manager, or administrator. According to Higginbotham and Weber (1992), typical occupations for working-class fathers are roles such as postal clerks, craftsman, semi-skilled manufacturing worker, janitor, and laborer. Middle class stable refers to women raised in families where either parent was employed as a professional, manager, or administrator. Typical occupations of middle-class parents are social worker, teacher, and school administrator as well as high-status professionals such as attorneys, physicians, and dentists.

Using this definition, 32 respondents were raised in middle class families and 20 respondents were reared in upwardly mobile families. Table 4 lists each respondent, her family’s social class of origin, and the specific type of relational messaging she received.

Upwardly mobile refers to women for whom neither parent was employed as a professional, manager, or administrator. According to Higginbotham and Weber (1992), typical occupations for working-class fathers are roles such as postal clerks, craftsman, semi-skilled manufacturing worker, janitor, and laborer. Middle class stable refers to women raised in families where either parent was employed as a professional, manager, or administrator. Typical occupations of middle-class parents are social worker, teacher, and school administrator as well as high-status professionals such as attorneys, physicians, and dentists. These women may currently be solidly middle class, but their upbringings, including family structure, family of origin, and exposure to romantic
relationships in childhood and adolescence, are relevant for how they define romantic situations and interpret meanings related to relationship formation.

Table 2. Respondents’ Parent’s Highest Level of Education (Combined)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Maternal Education (Highest Level)</th>
<th>High School</th>
<th>Bachelor’s</th>
<th>Master’s</th>
<th>MBA/Doctorate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>11 (21%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>9 (17%)</td>
<td>3 (6%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>8 (15%)</td>
<td>4 (8%)</td>
<td>2 (4%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MBA/Doctorate</td>
<td>1 (2%)</td>
<td>3 (6%)</td>
<td>5 (10%)</td>
<td>6 (12%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Respondents may be solidly middle class at the time of their interviews, but their social class of origin and the messages their parents and other family members transmitted to them are relevant for how they define romantic situations and interpret meanings related to relationship formation. To add some color to the description of these respondents relative to their families of origin and family structure, 41 respondents grew up in a traditional, two-parent household, one respondent grew up in
a blended two-parent household with her biological mother and stepfather, and 10 respondents grew up in a single parent household with their biological mother. Raised primarily by their biological mothers, six respondents report having a healthy, stable, enduring relationship with their non-resident fathers. Four respondents describe having an unstable and/or strained relationship with their non-resident biological fathers.

In addition to analyzing and coding interview transcripts, I also used the demographic questionnaire to establish respondent’s social class of origin. One of the items asks respondents to list their parents’ (mother and father) and grandparents’ (maternal and paternal) highest level of education and occupation. According to Higginbotham and Weber (1992), women’s transition from a working class family to a middle class life is a complex and sometimes challenging one. For Black women specifically, this transition involves unique gendered and racialized challenges and pressures. At the same time, Black women have a sense of responsibility to maintain or improve their social position through educational and career opportunities (Conley, 1999).

Table 3. Respondents’ Social Class of Origin (Combined)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Practical</th>
<th>Progressive</th>
<th>Protective</th>
<th>Principled</th>
<th>Silence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upwardly Mobile</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: In-depth interviews: N=52
The data analysis for this project proceeded along several stages following Burton’s (2009) process of “structured discovery”. I used the following established practices to describe the romantic expectations and experiences of Black middle class women. During data collection, I analyzed existing data to identify patterns and themes that emerged. During this iterative process, I frequently went back and forth between my data sources, interview transcripts, audio recordings, memos, notes, and between cases to understand the meaning of respondent’s statements and assertions.

I separated, sorted, and synthesized the data through qualitative coding. I used sensitizing concepts from extant theoretical and empirical studies on romantic partnering and marriage to code the transcripts. I revisited each type of data, interview transcripts, memos, demographic information, and my initial notes about each interview multiple times after the initial round of coding to determine whether there were any other ways that the data could be interpreted and to identify any disconfirming data (Streib 2011).

Sensitizing concepts are ideas from a review of existing theories that can help make sense of the data. I used sensitizing concepts related to the gaps in theory reviewed above. Based on a review of literature, I also created sensitizing concepts that potentially relate to the Black middle class, black women’s identities, gender and power, emotions, and the benefits of marriage. I dismissed and revised existing sensitizing concepts as needed to fit with the data. In the studies presented in this project, examples
of sensitizing concepts include uncertainty, trust, relational aspirations, marital expectations, and compromises/trade-offs.

Once data collection was complete, I used an inductive approach to analyzing the data. First, I inductively constructed codes that captured key aspects of the data (Charmaz 2006) and not from any preconceived logically deduced hypotheses. In order to categorize data, an “open coding” schema was developed focusing on the key analytic variables attitudes and beliefs about romantic relationships, expectations in the context of romantic interactions, marriage as a capstone, and social class origin to incorporate aspects of romantic partnering that respondents indicate are important but cannot be derived from extant research (Charmaz 2006). I coded each question by the topic it focused on, and then I used an open coding strategy to identify themes that emerged from respondents’ answers to each question. The analyses always began with transcripts on the within-case level. Beginning with an intra-case analysis allowed me to develop a complete, comprehensive understanding of the individuals’ experiences in romantic relationships and interactions. Once the within-case analysis was completed, the analyses proceeded to a within-group examination (e.g., married or unmarried women). Similarities between the within-case analysis and the between-case analysis provide greater evidence for the findings from the within-case examination.

The second phase of coding involved axial coding (Strauss 1987) which allowed me to discern the key relationships between variables. The final phase of the process
involves selective coding, during which the main “storyline” (Charmaz 2006) of the analysis is decided upon. I identified emerging themes, checked them against the data, revised them to fit the data, and then repeated this process until the theory accurately reflected the data (Tavory & Timmermans, 2012). Another task of providing rich descriptions of individuals’ experiences is to understand and explain how different aspects of the data fit together and to explain variation in the data. It is not enough to say that upwardly mobile respondents say A and B while middle class women says C and D. My task was to figure out why upwardly mobile and middle class respondents say different things, what it means that upwardly mobile respondents, for example, said A and B but not C and D, and why A and B fit together. This task required careful attention to what was not said as well as the social context in which some statements become likely and unlikely.

For example, I examined how upwardly mobile and middle-class respondents characterized their parents’ romantic relationship to establish whether there were salient differences in the quality, type, or observations made of the relationship. I examined upwardly mobile respondents descriptions and compared these descriptions among other upwardly mobile respondents and repeated this process for middle-class respondents. Taken together with other statements about their parents relationship, the quality of their interaction, the memories respondents had of their parents as a couple and as parents, I examined the contextual factors of the family, including major life
events such as a divorce, death of a relative, or physical or emotional abuse to determine why respondents characterized their parents’ romantic relationship in particular ways. Most importantly, I carefully considered how reports of particular incidences of financial challenges, for example, among upwardly mobile women may be related to the kinds of messaging their parents communicated to them about dating and romantic relationships.

The last phase of the analyses involved cross-group comparisons examining the similarities and differences between the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors about romantic partnering between middle class stable and upwardly mobile middle class Black women. I compared the romantic strategies and practices that upwardly mobile versus middle class stable Black women use when initiating, evaluating, maintaining, transitioning, and dissolving romantic relationships. Specifically, I counted how many upwardly mobile and middle-class Black women made statements that corresponded with each theme. I used analytic memos to identify themes within each transcript, between individual respondents, and among women in the same class category. I also used memos to elaborate categories, define relationships between these categories, and create links between emerging concepts.

The findings for each study reflect the specific research questions and the corresponding analytical strategy. I examined whether these women’s social position, class background and standing, and power in romantic relationships, or lack thereof
shape their beliefs, attitudes, and actions in romantic unions. Moreover, I consider the extent to which respondents families of origin and their experiences therein may influence how their beliefs, attitudes, and actions in romantic partnering.

1.8 Reflexivity Process

It is an established practice to mention reflexivity as a process in qualitative studies (Charmaz 2008; Few, Stephens, & Rouse-Arnett 2003). In many instances, researchers draw attention to identity differences between themselves and the populations they are studying. As a part of the research I have done for this project, I have engaged in the qualitative research process and am aware of my own intersectional identities that are very much a part of this process. In this study, on the surface, I am far more similar to my respondents than I am different. At the same time, I am careful to pay particular attention to the assumptions and biases that I bring to this kind of study. In addition to being an unmarried Black woman, I do not have my own biological children. My own parents divorced when I was very young, I was raised by a college educated single mother and grew up in a matriarchal centered family. As a result, of these experiences and characteristics, I have particular beliefs about love, romance, dating, family formation, fidelity, and the relationship formation process.

I tend to believe that men should embody and enact more traditionally masculine roles. I believe that men should take the initiative in romantic interactions and
“guide” a romantic interaction. At the same time, I believe that in heterosexual romantic interactions that women should “respond” to the intentions or actions of the men who express interest in them. In other words, I do not typically think that women should pursue men. Undoubtedly this is rooted in my own religious beliefs and cultural upbringing. As a result, I am certain that the motivations for some of my questions, especially around the process of relationship formation, were based in my own beliefs or expectations about how a dating relationship should start and be moved forward. Moreover, I assumed that most of the married women in the study would desire to be mothers and if they were married women that most would pursue childbearing and childrearing. As such, I structured some questions in a way that assumed that motherhood was an extension of a healthy romantic relationship or marriage, and I did not necessarily consider the reality that many women have no desire to become mothers.

Similarly, as a Black woman who grew up in Black communities with an abundance of Black friendships, I have been privy to many conversations about Black love, dating, heartbreak, marriage, and the like. One of the interesting phenomena that I have been exposed to in recent years is Black men who have sworn off dating black women. As such, as I prepared questions about racial identity and the role of race and colorism in romantic interactions and experiences, I assumed that respondents would have negative experiences with dating interracially and hold strong, negative impressions of Black men who date non-Black women. Surprisingly, the vast majority of
the women I interviewed had not had any interracial dating experiences to speak to. A few respondents mentioned having a fleeting crush on a non-Black romantic interest, or perhaps hanging out with someone they considered to be a potential partner in high school or college, but almost without exception, these interactions ended up being platonic in nature. And while some women expressed some concern over the prevalence of or perception of highly successful Black men entering into interracial relationships, several women – married and single – expressed a strong belief that men and women should pursue, date, and marry whoever they are attracted to and interested in irrespective of racial or ethnic background. Again, the angry Black woman myth was contradicted. At the same time, however, many respondents expressed a strong belief that colorism mattered very much in the romantic and relationship space. In several women’s view, colorism has taken on a different shape today than it did even twenty years ago; instead of focusing on a conceptualization of colorism that focuses on within race distinctions made based on complexion and phenotype, respondent’s view colorism on a broader spectrum inclusive of different races and ethnicities against which Black women are compared, either in popular discourse or in the imaginations of potential romantic partners. I was surprised that several women articulated this conceptualization of colorism. In fact, one went so far as to say, “It’s not light skinned versus dark skinned anymore. It’s us against them.”
While I have much in common with many of my respondents, I would be remiss to not mention some of the differences. To start, the majority of the respondents in this study grew up in two-parent households comprised of both of their biological parents. Based on recent data on the proportion of Black children born to unmarried mothers in the United States, I anticipated that far more participants would have been raised in single parent households. I was surprised both by the level of harmony and happiness that respondents described in their families of origin and between their parents, and in some cases, at the level of dysfunction and messiness involved in longstanding marital relationships. While some respondents idealize their parent’s romantic relationships and seek to emulate them in their own lives, other respondents staunchly rejected their parents’ approaches to and decisions in romantic relationships. Initially, I anticipated that this study would closely examine the romantic experiences of women in and out of their romantic relationships. I did not predict that respondents’ families of origin would factor so prominently in this study or my analyses of women’s romantic relationships.

Additionally, for my undergraduate and graduate studies, I attended predominantly white Research I Universities. Several women in this study attended Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and were very proud of this fact. However, this sense or sentiment did not influence any of my interactions with respondents to my knowledge. At the same time, four respondent’s beliefs and perspectives on race, class, and place struck me. Specifically, these women highlighted
their experiences as adolescents, young adults, and adults in racialized spaces. Black parents in predominantly white neighborhoods, schools, and extracurricular activities raised several respondents, and each of them emphasized and reiterated that their understanding of themselves and their experiences of Black women are significantly different than other Black women. Most importantly, they each told me more than once that I have to incorporate the idea that Black people and Black women are diverse, and not monolithic in terms of everything ranging from racial identity, dating and relationship experiences, and the challenges of fitting in when they have not been considered “black enough for Black folks or white enough for white folks”.

Though not explicitly mentioned in my findings, there were times that I shared specific information about my own life and relationship experiences with my respondents. Depending on the line of questioning, if I felt that it was important to signify certain aspects of my own experiences or identity, I did so. For example, one respondent alluded to, but seemed a bit hesitant to articulate that she started having sex later than she thought many women did. As such, it seemed as if she was reluctant to talk about her sexual experiences, because she had not had that many. At that point, I paused the recording and revealed some of my own experiences with sex and sexuality. Once this common ground was established, the respondent opened up about her feelings about engaging in a sexual relationship with a romantic partner outside of the context of a marital union.
Several qualitative researchers articulate the challenges of accessing vulnerable or understudied populations. Fortunately, I benefitted from my background, social location, and connection to certain educational institutions in accessing this population of women. Several emails that colleagues shared with their networks included some reference to the fact that I was born and raised in Detroit, or that I attended a particular high school. A few other colleagues or respondents mentioned that I completed my undergraduate studies at the University of Michigan, or a masters degree at Harvard University. My favorite line in any of the messages was “Lastly, in addition to LesLeigh being at Duke, she's Michigan grad, a Harvard grad, and most importantly a Detroit girl. Heeeeeeey!!!!” One of the most important messages communicated in the referral requests is that I am a Black woman conducting important research on a topic that matters very much to other Black women. This message was prominent in every email that I was copied on or conversation I was looped into. Without question, this piece of information figured prominently in several respondents’ responses to these referrals.

Either in person or over email, potential respondents demonstrated a palpable eagerness to discuss this part of their lives with me. Many articulated that romantic partnering and relationships were valued in and important to their personal, familial, and sister-circle networks. While some women expressed some tentativeness about sharing the most intimate details of their lives, several women asked if they should bring wine, or if we should meet over drinks to have these conversations. This is not to
diminish the weightiness of the content of our conversations. Instead, it is to signal that many of these women have deep, strong, meaningful lived experiences as it relates to their families of origin, their own romantic experiences, childbearing and childrearing, marriage, and creating new families, and they want these conversations to be candid and real. I could sense during and after our interviews that respondents felt a range of emotions. Some felt proud of the sincere romantic relationships and marriages they forged with loving, supportive partners. Others articulated a sense of frustration with their current romantic partners. Mothers spoke at length about the benefits and challenges associated with managing a professional career, prioritizing an intimate relationship, and mothering children. Happily married mothers and women expressed both pride and sheer exhaustion at their efforts to “do it all”.

Collins (1986) submits that our personal identities influence how we make sense of the world and our interactions with others. At the same time, however, it is important to note that there is nuance involved in the rapport that a researcher with the same race, class, and gender background as their respondents. When I asked respondents a specific question about colorism (e.g. skin complexion and hair texture), I was keenly aware that I embody the phenotypic characteristics that I am asking them about. So, sometimes I would touch my own hair to signal that it was comfortable to talk about hair texture and other phenotypic characteristics and their perspectives on the topics. And while I identify as Black, and I assume that in most spaces I am received and perceived as Black,
I cannot say with certainty that some women did not temper their responses around interracial dating, colorism, or perceptions of Black men’s preference for an “exotic” aesthetic, as a result of my physical appearance. One woman explicitly asked me if I was bi-racial, and I confirmed to her that I am not. While I cannot be entirely sure of what impact my physical appearance had on certain questions about identity and physical beauty, with respect to questions about the relationship formation process, women’s attitudes, beliefs, expectations, and actions, respondents were candid and forthcoming. For that I am deeply grateful.
Chapter 2. Contemporary and Classic Theories on Romantic Relationships

This study takes an integrated theoretical approach to understanding the thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, actions, and decision-making of middle class Black women in the context of romantic relationships. I drew upon four perspectives in doing this work – symbolic interactionism, exchange theory, Goffman’s presentation of self in everyday life, and intersectionality theory. These theories guided my understanding, thinking, awareness, and guided the kinds of questions I asked of respondents in this project. For example, symbolic interactionism, which I elaborate on in the next section, informed my understanding of the reasons for which women may say one thing about a particular romantic partner or situation and perhaps do something very different altogether. This theory helped me to understand the contradictions and how they emerged in romantic involvements.

2.1 Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is guided by three principles: 1) human beings act towards objects or people based on the meaning that the person or object has for them; 2) the meaning of objects or people are derived from the socially constructed interaction the individual has with the object or person; and 3) meanings are handled and modified through an interpretive process used by the person dealing with the object or person he or she encounters (Blumer 1969; 1983). The meanings individuals associate with objects,
events, people, and behaviors comes from a reflexive process of interpretation based on the meaning these things have for them, and these meanings are generated from social interaction. In the context of romantic relationships, symbolic interactionism can be used to understand or make sense of several aspects of the partnering process. Before outlining these processes, it is important to note a guiding belief that Garrett-Peters and Burton (2015) made in their study on marriage and marital delay among low-income women. The authors argued, “Humans are, by nature, contradictory beings.” As such, they and other symbolic interactionists assert that individuals can hold beliefs and make statements about a matter that do not align with their actions (Deutscher 1966; LaPiere 1934). Misalignments exist due to the desire for individuals to strategically manage impressions, the failure of anticipated plans, or one’s own confusion about desired goals. For middle class Black women specifically, it might be possible to exercise control over some outcomes (e.g., attending college, graduate, or professional school, or securing employment at a particular organization), however, other outcomes such as choosing a “good” romantic partner, getting married, or starting a family may be less predictable and less easily controlled in light of factors including, but not limited to, issues of relational compatibility, the availability of desirable romantic partners, Black male incarceration and unemployment, and relational power dynamics that disadvantage women.
Symbolic interactionism posits that individual’s self concepts are developed from social interaction. It is through the process of behaviors and the interpretation thereof that actions arise. Essentially, humans interpret actions or gestures in interaction and act on the basis of the interpreted meaning of an action or gesture. These actions occur as a part of a process of behavior and interpretation in an effort to coordinate our social actions and plans with others in our social lives (Garrett-Peters & Burton 2015; Blumer 1969; Mead 1934). According to Blumer (1955), the expression of one’s attitudes is not expressed through a single action. Instead attitudinal positions or dispositions are continually developing and constructed through social interaction with other actors culminating in a social act.

For symbolic interactionists, self-conceptions and identities can develop in the context of intimate partner relationships. For middle class women, it is likely that the roles “partner”, “lover”, “friend”, “mother”, and “wife” are self-conceptions and identities that women might develop in the context of an intimate, close relationship. These socially ascribed roles are learned and enacted the social lives of romantically involved middle class Black women. It is important to note that the ideal conceptions of marriage as a goal or a romantic relationship as an outcome is dependent on a romantic partners’ needs, desires, and as the commitment to the relationship changes over time.

In a dramaturgical model, social interaction is analyzed by how individuals, likened to actors on a stage, live out their day-to-day lives (Goffman 1959). An important
aspect of the dramaturgical interactionist perspective, an approach used to understand
the micro-level accounts of social interaction in everyday life, is the idea that an
individual’s identity is not stable, rather it is remade as an individual interacts with
others (Goffman 1959). A dramaturgical action is a social action that takes place in front
of an audience, or for others to see, and is taken in order to improve one’s image. An
element of one such social action is talk. Mills (1940) suggests talk as a form of data is
distinct from behavior. Garrett-Peters and Burton (2015) contend that talk is a “resource
that actors use, variously, to communicate with others, coordinate social action, do self-
presentation and impression management, repair social situations, manage emotions,
and the like”. Scott & Lyman (1968) suggest that the accounts we give to explain actions
are individual’s attempts to make sense of situations and explain intentions in ways that
are culturally acceptable and appropriate. In addition to accounts, actors will also
attempt to align actions to mend broken interactions (Stokes & Hewitt 1976); disclaimers to
remove personal responsibility for actions (Hewitt & Stokes 1975); excuses or justifications
to explain inappropriate behaviors (Scully & Marolla 1984); avoid devalued identities
through role distancing and altercasting (Goffman 1959; Snow & Anderson, 1987; Sykes
& Matza 1957), and motives to explain their actions to audiences regarding conduct that
might be questioned (Mills 1940; Scully & Marolla, 1984). For this study, it was
important to analyze middle class Black women’s “talk” – to attend both to what they
say they desire in a romantic partner and expect in an intimate relationship, and at the
same time, it is imperative to take note of their descriptions of recent romantic interactions. I will treat women’s reports of beliefs, attitudes, expectations, and experiences regarding romantic life as a form of “discursive behavior” (Garrett-Peters & Burton 2015; McClure 1983) and pay close attention to any discrepancies that may exist between what they articulate they desire from a romantic partner and their actions in intimate relationships.

2.2 Social Exchange Theory

According to social exchange theory, individuals are motivated by self-interest, constrained by their choices, and generally act rationally in the context of romantic decision-making. The basic premise of social exchange theory is that human behavior can be seen as a rational choice in which a person seeks to maximize rewards or benefits and minimize pain or costs, or exchanges resources or statuses with a romantic partner. Black middle class women may have successfully pursued academic or educational opportunities that advance a specific career trajectory, because they believed that the time, effort, energy, and financial investment maximizes the rewards exchanged for the learning, credential, and/or network. Concerning romantic relationships, the social exchange perspective refers to the idea that the development and advancement of relationships is based on the trade of rewards between exchange partners, costs associated with involvement, and any plausible alternative possibilities (Strong & Cohen
2016). In human relationships, certain exchanges can be difficult to quantify including love, attractiveness, and status. Individuals engaging in romantic relationships will seek to maximize rewards in a relationship, while at the same time taking into account what their partner needs. For middle class Black women, extant literature does not clearly articulate which rewards middle class women seek to maximize, or how they evaluate or respond to the needs of their romantic partners.

Thibaut and Faye (1959) and Nye (1979) outlined the main concepts of the theory including rewards, costs, comparison level, comparison levels for alternatives, and the norm of reciprocity. Rewards refer to anything in the social world from which individuals can derive pleasure. On the other hand, costs mean any status relationship or feeling in the context of a relationship that an individual does not like. A comparison level refers to what individuals believe they deserve based on their social position or how they see themselves in comparison to others. An extension of this concept is the comparison levels for alternatives, which refer to the comparison individuals involved in romantic relationships make between their current relationship and other possible relationship alternatives. The norm of reciprocity refers to the way that social relationships are characterized by interdependence and exchanges.

Social exchange theory has been applied to dating, courtship, and marriage to understand why individuals choose to create and maintain romantic relationships. The theory posits that individuals conduct a cost-benefit analysis that considers how we feel
when we are around someone, whether a partner is needy or self-absorbed, or whether a person is physically attractive or possesses certain desirable personality traits. Based on this analysis, we feel either positive or negative about a relationship. Beyond general feelings about a romantic partner, scholars have also used social exchange theory to explain relationship formation (Sassler 2010), falling in love and the feeling of being in love (Pines 2013), commitment (Stanley, Rhoades, & Whitton 2010), and sexual behavior and satisfaction (Lawrence & Byers 1995; Donnelly & Burgess 2008; Yabiku & Gager 2009). Historically, exchange theory predicts that men who have higher status and income are more likely to marry women who are more physically attractive (Elder, 1969; Goode, 1951; Taylor & Glenn 1976). In a second type of exchange theory, which has declined in recent years as more women have entered the workforce, suggests that men exchange their economic skills with women who have “strong domestic skills” (Becker 1991).

Much of the research on social exchange theory explains the exchange processes involved in the romantic relationships between interracial partners, still, there is some research that examines the exchanges between Black men and Black women in romantic relationships. It is important to note that within the dating and marriage hierarchy in the United States, whites are located at the top, Asians and Latinos in the middle, and Blacks are perceived to be concentrated at the bottom (Blumer 1958; Bonilla-Silva 2004). Social exchange theory predicts that relationship formation between interracial partners will
move more quickly when the male partner has higher status than the female partner. The projected speed of relationship formation is associated with women from lower status groups (e.g. Black women, other racial minorities) competing with higher status women for sexual intimacy and shared living arrangements with higher status men (Sassler & Joyner 2011). In addition, scholars find that Black women are less willing to marry a Black man who does not have similar levels of education, but are instead more inclined to marry a white man who has lower social or economic standing, in part, due to the perceived benefits of what scholars refer to as a status-caste exchange (Craig-Henderson 2011). According to the status-caste exchange theory, one romantic partner’s socioeconomic position is exchanged for the other romantic partner’s racial caste status (Rosenfeld 2005).

When exchange theory has been applied to Black relationships, scholars have found that skin color, socioeconomic position, and social status are consequential for mate selection. Historically, a premium has been placed on complexion in Black communities. Lighter skin complexions were more favored among Blacks, and lighter skinned Blacks had higher incomes, better educational and employment opportunities, and higher occupational status than darker skinned Blacks, due, in part, to the better treatment light skinned Blacks received during and after slavery (Bowser 1997; Zack 1995). Similarly, characteristics like body type and hair texture are consequential for ratings of Black women’s attractiveness. Much of the prior research on Black women and
romantic partnering suggests that sex-ratio imbalance influences mate selection. Essentially, when there are few available Black men as potential romantic partners Black women are more likely to marry someone of a different race or someone who is significantly older or younger, “marry down” in terms of social status, or postpone marriage altogether (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan 1999). In addition, literature on Black women and educational attainment suggests that women with more education as less satisfied in their romantic relationships or choose not to enter into romantic relationships at all (Boyd-Franklin 2003; Wilson 2009).

For Black women, exchange theories have been used to explain their willingness or desire to maximize on their romantic or sensual feelings, commitment to a relationship, and the stability the relationship provides for their children, and to push aside feelings of disappointment associated with a lack of trust or fidelity or poor communication with a romantic partner (Burton 2014; Burton & Tucker 2009; Hastings 2013).

For middle class or upwardly mobile Black undergraduate and graduate students, scholars find that Black women pursue rewards such as love, social status, and intimacy, whereas Black men pursue more sexual partners, variety among their romantic partners, and experience less pressure to be monogamous in light of the ratio of men to women (Hall, Lee, & Witherspoon 2014). In terms of costs, Black women may find that the desire to be involved in and maintain romantic relationships with men may
be so strong that they may be inclined to give up some of their power in these relationships and their demand for monogamy in exchange for companionship and a temporary relationship (Hall, Lee, & Witherspoon 2014).

Drawing upon the aforementioned research for Black Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) students, I expected that Black middle class women’s tradeoffs will bear some similarities to that of Black female college students. It is likely that Black middle class women will face comparable limitations in terms of the ratio of eligible men to women and will encounter Black male partners who have access to larger pools of sexual and romantic partners to choose from. At the same time, Black middle class women bring significant educational, employment, economic, and communication resources to romantic relationships and should be able to draw on these resources in determining what qualities or circumstances a potential romantic partner should provide them with to meet their desired relational benefit or outcome.

Furthermore, there is no study that clearly articulates what types of exchange relationships Black middle class women are most likely to engage in, or what rewards this group seeks to maximize on in their intimate relationships. By asking middle class Black women specifically what they are looking for in a romantic partner, what sacrifices or trade-offs they are willing to make in the early phases of and in more established romantic relationships, and what experiences or actions are so-called deal breakers for them, we will gain insight into Black middle class women’s relationship expectations.
and the factors that influence relationship desirability, satisfaction, and permanence among Black middle class women. In addition, in light of the gender imbalance among Black men and Black women, it will be interesting to determine whether this group of Black women perceives there is support for romantic relationships from girlfriends, or perhaps a sense of competition among similarly situated female friends or peers, and whether interracial dating is a possible, preferred, or ideal relationship arrangement.

2.3 Goffman’s Presentation of Self in Everyday Life

Goffman (1955; 1959) asserts that people generally try to present themselves in controlled and idealized ways. In Irving Goffman’s (1959) classic distinction, a presentational “front stage,” where individuals present their best selves, obscures a “back stage,” where unlikable or repressed facts are revealed. He believed that when an individual comes in contact with other people, an actor will attempt to control or guide the impression that others develop by changing or adjusting his or her appearance, behavior, or the setting in which they interact. At the same time the actor is presenting his or her self, the person the individual is interacting with is trying to gather information and form an opinion of the person with whom they are interacting.

In recent years, several scholars have examined the role of the presentation of self in online dating. Ellison, Heino, and Gibbs (2006) examined the self-presentation
strategies of online dating participants and found that participants pay close attention to small cues online and often try to create profiles that reflect their “ideal self”.

For middle class Black women involved in on- or offline dating, romantic interactions, relationships, and marriages, I examine how they articulate certain aspects of their self-presentation including beliefs about physical attractiveness (e.g., hair style, body type, aesthetic maintenance routines, exercise programs), style of dress, efforts to attract potential partners (e.g., flirting, curating online dating photographs or profiles), personal interests (e.g., travel, sports, hobbies), and the communication of professional accomplishments and cultural acumen (e.g., universities attended, career milestones, travel, interest in the arts). Beyond physical attractiveness and presentation and communication of particular interests, Black women also manage the impressions associated with or conclusions drawn about their emotions in the context of relationships. In other words, women generally, and Black women specifically in this study, are socialized to manage their emotions in gendered and racialized ways. As a consequence, Black women’s emotions are expressed and managed in particular ways in romantic relationships. Undoubtedly, norms about expressing sadness or disappointment, vulnerability and trust, and even anger influence how Black middle class women think, communicate, and engage in romantic relationships. Managing and controlling impressions, both of physical attractiveness and emotionality in romantic interactions, is a part of the strategy women engage in when pursuing romantic
relationships. The emotions that women experience and communicate to potential or actual romantic partners is important to understanding what women believe about themselves and their romantic partners. More precisely, this information can shed light on the factors and processes that Black middle class women associate with relationship formation, maintenance, and permanence.

2.4 Race, Class, Gender, and Power: Intersectionality and Critical Race Theories

Historically, there have been three dominant ways gender has been examined in sociology. The three waves included 1) an emphasis on sex differences based on the biological properties of individuals, 2) a focus on individual sex roles and socialization into these roles, and 3) the recognition that gender is an organizing principle in all social systems including work, politics, economic development, families, and romantic relationships. In Goffman’s view, “Gender is a socially scripted dramatization of the culture’s idealization of feminine and masculine natures, played for an audience...” (Goffman 1967). Gender scholarship suggests that the lower status and power possessed by women in society are mirrored in the marital relationship. According to Risman (2004), the institution of marriage and social life are organized around gender. This organization places men and women in unequal relationships with one another with men typically holding more power than women.
In addition to society being organized by gender, the United States is a race-conscious society (Kibria, Bowman, & O’Leary, 2013). Beyond the categories of “Black” and “White”, which are associated with phenotypical traits or physical markers, including skin color, hair texture, and facial features, race is a politically and socially constructed phenomenon. Race, as Bonilla-Silva explains, is not a characteristic intrinsic to individuals, instead it is a socially produced one (Bonilla-Silva, 2009). While Bonilla-Silva’s conception of race as socially constructed, and other scholars extend this conceptualization and highlight the ways that race “may continually require remaking to meaningfully reflect the personal and public identities and experiences of individuals and families in a multiracial society (Burton, et al., 2014).

In this study, race is conceptualized and interpreted as both socially constructed and “a contested experience” one in which respondents are macro-socially perceived and treated as uniformly and unequivocally Black. At the same time, however, these women negotiate their racial identities internally and interpersonally, handle mismatches between the ways that their families, peers, colleagues, and potential romantic partners engage or disengage with them and their own perceptions of their racial identities, and in some cases seek to understand and reconcile how phenotypic markers of racial identity including complexion, hair texture including natural styles and locs, and body type enable or hinder their perceived desirability to potential Black and non-Black romantic partners. The biracial and multiracial women in the study who
identify as Black have their own unique understandings of what it means to be a Black woman – for some their Blackness is salient and unequivocal, for others their bi- or multiracialness is central to their understanding of who they are and how they interpret their place in the world. This finding support existing research that explores the ways that race is socially constructed and racial socialization inform individuals understanding of their racial identity (Bonilla-Silva 1997; 1999; Hughes, Rodriguez, Smith, Johnson, Stevenson, & Spicer, 2006; Collins 1987).

Scholars articulate the unique challenges of Black women who face “triple oppression” or race, class, and sex (King 1988; Lynn 2014; Marable 2000). It is impossible to describe the romantic lives of Black women, however, without acknowledging the social and economic factors that structure and influence the context in which intimate relationships develop. Marable (2000) writes: “From the dawn of the slave trade until today, U.S. capitalism was both racist and deeply sexist. The superexploitation of Black women became a permanent feature in American social and economic life, because sisters were assaulted simultaneously as workers, as Blacks, and as women. This triple oppression escaped Black males entirely.”

Scholars have argued that gender and race are intertwined within social institutions, such as marriage, that define the parameters of interpersonal relationships in the context of the institution (Ridgeway 2011). bell hooks (1999) writes, “Black women face a culture where practically everyone wants us to stay in our place (i.e. to be
content to accept life on the bottom of this society’s economic and social totem pole).

Significantly, even when individual black women are able to advance professionally and acquire a degree of economic self-sufficiency, it is in the social realm that racist and sexist stereotypes are continually used both as defining Black women’s identity and interpreting our behavior.” As such, Crenshaw (2005) advocates for the theory of intersectionality as a way to view race, gender, and sexuality together. Crenshaw (1991) argues that intersectional approaches should be utilized to analyze the romantic and intimate lives of Black women, in part, because of the complexity and inequality that is associated with the social and political contexts and positions these women occupy.

At the same time, scholars find that the same gendered schemas that create unequal marriage roles are also racialized. One way that relationships and marriages are sites of inequality for Black women in general is the greater availability of Black women, both absolutely and when constrained by educational credentials. Black women’s’ availability privileges Black men and reduces women’s bargaining power in romantic interactions and relationships (Johnson & Staples 2004). For Black middle class women, the availability of similarly situated Black male romantic partners can cause a significant imbalance in power in romantic interactions.

In a sobering historical description of the intersection of race, class and gender for Black families, Hill (2004, p. 201) wrote:
“Slavery, racism, and economic exclusion curtailed the ability and willingness of many African Americans to conform to mainstream gender ideologies that call for economically dominant men, dependent/submissive women, and marriage centered families. African American families were stigmatized as deviant and unstable throughout the twentieth century, although history shows that many responded to racial oppression by creating more equitable and innovative family relationships. For example, middle-class Black women virtually pioneered the trend of combining family and employment, and... lower-class women often resisted patriarchal marriages altogether in favor of female-centered family structures... The benefits of marriage to economically marginal men simply did not compensate for their loss of autonomy or the more reliable extended family resources (Hill 2004, p. 201). “

Intersectionality expounds on the ways that social categories, including race, class, and gender, operate to influence the experiences of people who are subject to multiple forms of oppression or subordination in a society (Collins 2009; Crenshaw 1993; Settles 2006). Crenshaw, who pioneered the conceptualization of intersectionality through a study of the failure of anti-discrimination laws to protect women of color, posits, “The intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism” (Crenshaw 1989). In its early form, intersectionality focused on power and political systems of inequality (Sprague 2016), now, it has become more concerned with “categories, identities, and subjectivities” (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall 2013). This way of thinking about the problems associated with sameness and difference and its relation to
power emerged as a way to understand intersecting social identities and how these identities are related to systems of oppression and disadvantage in society.

In addition to race and gender, class position or socioeconomic status have been identified as an important determinants of marital behaviors and perceptions of marital quality in particularly for African Americans (Bryant & Wickrama, 2005; Conger, Rueter, & Elder, 1999), Clark-Nicolas & Gray-Little, 1991; Tucker et al., 1993). With respect to the intimate lives of Black Americans, scholars have tended to “study down” rather than “study up”. To that end, there are several studies that explore the intimate, familial, and romantic lives of poor women, women of color, and the intersection of these two groups (Edin 2000; Edin & Kefalas 2005; 2011; Burton & Tucker 2009; Burton, Cherlin, Winn, Estacion, Holder-Taylor 2007), but fewer studies have explored the experiences of middle class Black women (Haynes 2000; Barnes 2015; Clarke 2011).

In addition to the master categories of race, class, and gender, Sprague (2016:12) argued that before feminist scholars gained recognition, most social scientists did not emphasize understanding or examining emotions or intimate relationships. Through their work, feminist scholars debunked notions that public and private lives and distinct spheres of social life. At the same time, however, scholars suggest that researchers have been more concerned with the ways that gender interacts with race than the ways that gender interacts with and outcomes vary by class. This study considers the romantic and
intimate lives of Black women at the intersection of these three social categories and incorporates a careful examination of their emotional experiences.

With this in mind, it is important to determine first whether Black women are aware of or perceive a sex or gender imbalance in dating. Second, it will be important to understand whether this belief or perception influences the decisions that they make in dating, relationships, or marriage. Third, many of the hypotheses generated on this topic related to Black middle class women partnering with Black men, irrespective of their class standing. It will be important to determine whether this group of women has experience with or is open to the possibility of dating men from other racial or ethnic backgrounds or class positions.

This study addresses this gap in the literature by focusing on middle class women whose identities as professional, well-educated women of color represent an important, and yet under examined group positioned at the nexus of race, class, gender, and power. With respect to gender and traditional gender norms, it will be important to ascertain whether this group of women ascribes to more traditional gender roles in relationships, including but not limited to, domestic, homemaking, or nurturing roles, or whether women are willing to adopt more assertive, traditionally masculine roles in taking initiative to initiate, advance, or formalize romantic or intimate exchanges.

Beyond understanding how Black middle class women define and enact gender roles in
romantic relationships, I am also interested in understanding how this group of women defines a “good relationship”.

According to Burton, Bonilla-Silva, Ray, Buckelew, and Hordge-Freeman (2014):

“Critical race theories represent ways of thinking about and assessing social systems and groups that incorporate recognition of the following principles: (a) race is a central component of social organizations and systems, including families; (b) racism is institutionalized – it is an ingrained feature of racialized social systems; (c) everyone within racialized social systems may contribute to the reproduction of these systems through social practices; and (d) racial and ethnic identities, in addition to ‘the rules, practices, and assignments of prestige and power’ associated with them, are not fixed entities, but rather they are socially constructed phenomena that are continually being revised on the basis of a group’s own self-interests.”

Much could be said about what it means to be Black in America today, and even more could be said about what it means to be a Black woman – politically, emotionally, relationally, sexually, and culturally. In the present study, the unique familial, romantic and intimate experiences of Black women are brought to the fore. One point that should be made here, and that will be elaborated on later in this study, is that Black middle class women, as conceptualized in this project, are not a monolithic group. They are diverse and complex across many dimensions.
What is more, it is important to take into account the ways that Black women’s romantic and emotional lives are situated in and play out in racialized systems – schools, universities, neighborhoods, workplaces, and others. Romance is not simply an emotional experience for Black women; it is a political and racialized one.

Scholars know little about how their experiences related to romantic partnering are similar to or different from middle class women from other racial groups. As such, it will be important to make their intersectional identities salient and to examine the messaging they received during childhood and adolescence about Black marriages and relationships, and what expectations they currently have of the advantages and challenges Black women contend with in romantic partnerships. Specifically, I am interested in exploring how power is gained, controlled, or relinquished in the partnering process and whether women have particular beliefs about the emotional, physical, psychological, status-based, financial, or social compromises or trade-offs they may be expected to make to secure and maintain romantic love based on their social location.

Candace: My therapist has said you just like, you know, a lot of women, get into relationships and if you look at a relationship like a house. He was like a lot of women will get into a house and their house is just too big. He was like, they can’t fill that house up. Like they can’t meet the demands of the house. They just can’t. They just can’t. He’s like then a woman will get into a house and then it’s too small. Like she can’t expand. She can’t grow. She can’t do anything. He was like, very rarely are women taught how to find a house that’s just right. He’s like to find a house that’s just right. It’s like where it fits you on every level and I think, what I feel like my own experience isn’t just, it’s not even a sacrifice. It’s we don’t, we make excuses to make the house fit or don’t fit. And it’s just like we just, we don’t believe that we can make it just right. That we have the ability to make a house or build a house that is just right.

LesLeigh: Let me ask you a question. Using this analogy, what is it that you, is it that you think women are choosing men with the wrong characteristics or do you think they’re approaching relationships from the wrong perspective, in terms of this house.

Candace: I mean, I think from my standpoint, like I think that I wasn’t necessarily taught what red flags were. So I don’t know, I don’t know how many, I think women have to learn them as they go and I think that’s hard, especially, you know, when they start dating, like I said, like when I started dating [husband’s name], like nobody was there to tell me, and I know there’s literature out there and there’s definitely literature for teenage girls out there. Like these are some, some pitfalls, this is what you should look for in a relationship but like when you’re in it and like you said, they assume that it’s just like the lower income that get that information. We didn’t get that information at Rebirth. Like there wasn’t anybody telling us, like you know, if your boyfriend is controlling or trying to tell you not to do something or go somewhere, like that’s a problem and how you can like break free from that or just build up that confidence. I think that red flags and being able to set those boundaries start, have to start really young is what I really think. Because they need to be engrained. They need to be like engrained and they need to be a part of who you are to be able to like accept or not accept certain things and stand by it.
Candace learned something about romantic relationships at thirty-five years of age that she wished that she had learned much earlier in her life. She deeply believes that if she had positive guidance from her parents, teachers, or role models, she would have avoided some of the challenges she experienced in her dating and marital relationships. Candace raises an important issue for social scientists to consider as they explore issues in and around the romantic lives of Black women – namely how do or don’t families message or transmit information about dating, love, romantic relationships, and marriage to their children.

Research on the transmission of knowledge and beliefs about romantic unions have long been of interest to sociologists. Much of that research has focused on the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors observed and learned in the family of origin that contribute to the development of healthy, enduring romantic relationships or challenges in developing or maintaining intimate relationships in adolescence and adulthood (Conger, Cui, & Bryant 2000; Amato & DeBoer 2001; Weigel 2007). The majority of this research has focused on specific characteristics of the families of origin, including family structure, socioeconomic characteristics, interactional qualities including communication, discipline, and punishment that contribute to or hinder the development of intimate relationships and marriages (Bryant and Conger 2002, Conger et al. 2000). For the most part, however, this research has focused on white families.
Little attention has been paid to Black middle class women and their familial and romantic experiences.

Nonetheless, recently, however, Barnes (2016) explored the conflicts between work and family that many middle class Black women experience. She found that Black middle class women’s parents encourage them from an early age to be independent, career-minded, and to take care of themselves, which is consistent with other studies on the subject (Elliot, Powell, & Brenton 2015; Collins 1987; Hill 2001). Drawing on in-depth interviews from 23 respondents living in Atlanta, Georgia, Barnes examined how Black married career women seek to balance responsibilities to their immediate and extended families, cultural expectations of the Black community, healthy romantic relationships with their husbands, and their sense of responsibility to raise grounded, strong children. She reported that Black women prioritize commitments to family, in particular the intellectual and social development and well being of their children, over professional goals and trajectories.

Despite these necessary and timely contributions to this area of research, still little is known about the factors that inform Black middle class women’s beliefs, attitudes, and actions in the context of romantic relationships. Using intersectionality theory as lens to understand racialized and gendered socialization practices in childhood and adolescence among Black girls, this study explores how well established processes including socialization and class reproduction, observational learning, and
explicit messaging from parents to children influence Black middle class women’s thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes about and in romantic or intimate interactions.

Doob (2013) described social or class reproduction as “the structures and activities that transmit social inequality from one generation to the next”. Bourdieu (1985) articulates four resources for social reproduction in society including, financial capital, cultural capital, human capital, and social capital. Each of these four forms of capital are consequential in social reproduction as capital is transmitted or passed down from one generation to the next. For example, individuals who grow up in the upper or middle classes have advantages. Their families have more money and have more resources to anticipate and plan for the future, and actually improve their already relatively good social position. On the other hand, working class or upwardly mobile families have less money and fewer resources including time, energy, and education and are less likely to be able to use their resources to improve their social class position.

Observational learning is a form of social learning and it refers to a process through which a person learns new information or behaviors by observing others (Bandura 1961). Social learning theory focuses on parents as role models and explains that children look to and model behaviors after their parents, and this modeling of behavior influences adolescents and young adults after they leave home (Feng, Giarrusso, Bengston, & Frye, 1999). In this study, I am interested in how respondents witnessed and interpreted their parent or parents’ romantic relationship(s) and
interactions in childhood and adolescence. Specifically, I believe that their observations of their parents’ relationships are consequential to their beliefs and cognitions about love, romance, and marriage. In addition to observational learning, the concept messaging refers to explicit verbal communication from parents to their children. By establishing what kinds of candid conversations or advice parents communicated to their daughters about dating and romantic involvement during childhood and adolescence, it will be possible to establish the ways that parents influenced the knowledge and beliefs that women have about romantic interactions or possibilities. This paper explores that phenomenon using symbolic interactionist, racial and gender socialization, and intersectionality theories to consider these issues.

Scholars have examined the factors or precursors that are likely to increase or decrease the likelihood of forming stable, healthy romantic relationships. The present study extends a long tradition of scholarship that explores the relationships between three important predictors of romantic relationship success – socialization, family of origin, and interactional characteristics – and focuses on the ways that parents transfer or transmit beliefs about romantic love, relationships, and marriage to their children. For the present study, I am most interested in establishing respondents’ perceptions of the beliefs, knowledge, or attitudes about love and romantic relationships are transferred, transmitted, or developed within and through the family of origin. Specifically, I am interested in understanding the ways that respondents receive and interpret particular
beliefs about love and romance from their parents through their explicit verbal messaging and the ways that parental behaviors, actions, and interactions in the context of their own romantic relationships provide a model or blueprint of sorts for children and adolescents to mirror in their own romantic interactions in adulthood.

This study was designed to explore the messaging upwardly mobile and middle class Black parents transmitted to their daughters during childhood and adolescence. Messaging is defined in two ways. First, I am interested in respondent’s parent’s marital relationship for two reasons. It is important to identify respondent’s observation, explanation, and evaluation of their parent/s romantic relationship. In addition, I am interested in identifying what respondent’s learned from observing their parent/s engage in a romantic relationship. Second, I identify specific advice and guidance Black parents gave respondent’s during adolescence and adulthood about dating, love, marriage, and romantic partnering.

3.1 Socialization

Generally, socialization is the process through which an infant or child begins to acquire the skills required to become a functioning member of the society in which he or she lives. During infancy, childhood, and adolescence, young people have a set of social interactions and experiences that allow them to learn the culture of their society and express this culture in appropriate ways (Super & Harkness 1986). Of course, the
socialization process is not one directional where parents’ beliefs are instilled in children. Instead, it is a bidirectional process through which children interpret, understand, and accept parents’ socialization messages. For decades, developmentalists have acknowledged and explored the active participation of children in their own socialization (Piaget 1983). Developmental psychologists emphasize the active role of children in interpreting messages that are received from their environment in order to make sense of the world and to learn what behaviors are appropriate (Grusec & Hastings 2014). For the present study, three dimensions of socialization are of particular importance -- racial, gender, and emotional socialization.

### 3.2 Racial Socialization

Childhood socialization is a dimension of early family life that is consequential for young Black women in forming racial, gender, and relational identities. Racial socialization refers to the process through which parents communicate verbal and nonverbal messages to their children what it means to be Black in the United States (Boykin & Toms, 1985; Peters & Massey, 1983). These messages promote racial pride, prepare children for racial bias, emphasize ways to cope or deal with discrimination, and teach children how to mistrust (Dunbar, Perry, Cavanaugh, & Leerkes 2014). According to Garcia Coll et al. (1996), parents’ racial socialization is a mechanism through which racial and ethnic minority families seek to protect their children from
discrimination. A key aspect of racial socialization involves parents actively teaching their children how to regulate their emotions to deal with racialized discrimination. Scholars who study Black families have explored ways that gender, race, and class converge to shape socialization processes (Coll, Crnic, Lamberty, Wasik, Jenkins, Garcia, & McAdoo 1996; Hill 2001).

In addition to affirming children’s racial identity (Lareau 1998), Coard and Sellers (2005) state that many Black parents, based on the availability of material and time resources, engage in the process of socializing their children into the role that race will inevitably play in their lives. Black girls receive messages that instill racial pride (Bowman & Howard 1985) and prepare them to cope with racial discrimination (Neblett, Philip, Cogburn, & Sellers 2006). Hill (2001) posits that socioeconomic inequalities, racism, and African-centered values are associated with the adoption of flexible gender roles in Black families. More recently Shelton (2008, p. 253) finds that Black parents are not “a culturally monolithic group” and approach lessons about race and race relations from diverse perspectives. His research finds that those parents who engage their children in the process of racial socialization do so in order to “demystify and empower” their children to capitalize on social and economic opportunities in America.
3.3 Gender Socialization

In addition to racial socialization, scholars argue that young Black women are involved in a unique process of gender socialization. Generally, gender socialization refers to a process through which biological sex or observable sexual anatomy, male or female, provides an organizing framework for how individuals are treated and expected to behave (Huston 1983; Ruble & Martin 1998). Fagot, Rodgers, & Leinbach (2000) write that every society has particular rules and customs that prescribe what males and females are supposed to be and do. They write, “As children master and internalize this system, they learn to discriminate and label themselves and others on the basis of sex, to recognize attributes, attitudes, and behaviors that are typical of or considered appropriate for each sex, and learn to do what is seen as appropriate and avoid what is not.” Existing literature on the subject suggests that parents are central in the process of gender socialization.

In recent decades, scholars have started to explore racial and ethnic differences in gender socialization as most explanations of these processes have focused on European Americans (McDade 1995). Scholars have started to explore the cultural values that are key to the gender-related socialization experiences of Black, Latino, and Asian-American children (Espin 1997; Flores, Eyre, & Millstein 1998; Thornton, Chatters, Taylor, & Allen 1990; Settles 2006; Talbani and Hasanali 2000). Hill & Tyson (2008) suggest that Black parents teach their daughters are taught to be obedient, quiet, and clean and to be “kind,
unselfish, attractive, loving, well mannered, and to have a good marriage and be a good parent” (2008:153).

Other scholars find that black girls are socialized into performing household chores, nurturing younger siblings and children, and performing other domestic responsibilities (Johnson 2013). At the same time, some scholars suggest that black daughters are taught to be individualistic, authoritative, confident, and sexually assertive, familistic, and nurturing (Scott & Clark 1986). Staples and Johnson (1993) suggest that parents instill a sense of competence and self-reliance in their black daughters. With respect to education, Black middle class parents, specifically, hold high educational expectations for their sons and daughters (Lareau 2003) and embrace gender equality more often than black working class parents (Allen & Olson 2001). Black girls are raised to pursue successful careers, economic and financial self-reliance, and to be role models for the black community (Higginbotham 2001; Shaw 1996). Moreover, even if Black girls and women aspire to more normative white middle class roles, because of the opportunity structure in the United States, they would not necessarily achieve these goals. In fact, Collins (2004) writes, “Black men and women did not adhere to traditional gender roles because they could not.” (p.202). Scholars consistently find that Black women’s work has been essential to the stability of the Black family, and Black women’s notion of womanhood has been closely tied to hard work, self-reliance, and gender equality (Collins, 1991, 2000, 2004).
Along with childhood and adolescent socialization and its influence on Black women’s orientation to work, family, and educational opportunities, there is some evidence that young Black women’s socialization influenced their romantic relationship and family formation decisions as early as the 1800s. Hill (2008) claims that two-thirds of free Black women in New York State decided to remain unmarried and instead work as domestics for white families. While some scholars have attempted to trace the differences in marriage patterns by race to historical influences (e.g. the legacy of slavery), in the early 20th century marriage was common among Black American men and women. In fact, Black women actually tended to marry earlier than white women through the 1940s (Tucker & Tucker 1989), and until the 1950s, the timing of marriage was more similar between white and Black women than it is today.

3.4 Emotional Socialization and Social Class

Lareau (2002) examined working- and middle-class Blacks and whites’ parenting styles and the corresponding outcomes associated with these practices. Lareau argued that the middle class parents’ approach (concerted cultivation) and the working class parenting style (the accomplishment of natural growth) have both advantages and disadvantages. Still, her findings imply that middle class parents contribute to their children’s academic and social advantages through highly structured parenting strategies. Lareau’s analyses emphasized class differences, and to some extent ignore
racial differences across groups of parents. Still, her findings supported the reality that many Black middle class parents seek to promote intellectual development and academic success by engaging and fostering their children’s talents and involving them in highly structured leisure and afterschool activities.

Another dimension of Lareau’s research that is important for this study is the concept of emotional socialization. Emotional socialization is the process through which individuals develop the ability to “understand their own and others’ emotions, develop values about emotions, develop values about which emotions are desirable and undesirable, and learn how to experience, express, and manage emotion in ways that reflect power-status relations (Kemper 1978; Wilkins & Pace 2014). In terms of the earliest forms of social interaction, families are not only the first site of emotional socialization, they are integral as interactions with parents, caregivers, and siblings in one’s early life that gives a person his or her first sense of self, emotions, and personhood (Cooley 1902; Mead 1934; Wilkins & Pace 2014).

According to Lareau, the parenting style practiced by middle class parents (concerted cultivation) instructs children in a form of cultural capital that aligns with institutional expectations. For example, Lareau and Calarco (2012) describe that working class parents often employ socioemotional strategies including either suppression or anger and direct confrontation to communicate with teachers. Whereas middle class parents typically employ empathy, respect, appreciation, and cooperation (Lareau &
Calarco, 2012). Instead of using a confrontational or infuriated tone of voice, middle class parents use a “light, friendly, and conversational tone” even when they disagree with teachers. As a result, when middle class children enter school, they have learned from their parents how to interact with peers and teachers in ways that are consistent with teacher’s values and emotional expectations, and have been empowered by their parents to advocate for and intervene for themselves in schooling environments. Thus, students are rewarded for their appropriate behaviors that align with middle class expectations.

Beyond Lareau’s work, it is well established that biological factors contribute to children’s ability to manage, understand, and display emotions. At the same time, however, children’s emotional development is also heavily socialized (Denham, Bassett, & Wyatt, 2007; Morris, Silk, Steinberg, Myers, & Robinson, 2007). Eisenberg, Cumberland, and Spirand (1998) identified three ways parents directly socialize their children’s emotional development. They describe parents’ reactions to children’s emotion, parent expressiveness, and parent-child discussion of emotions as ways that children are socialized to think about, understand, and communicate their emotional feelings and experiences including positive emotions such as joy, surprise, and interest, and negative emotions including sadness and anger.

It is important to note that culture influences the kinds of emotional socialization processes that families engage in (Eisenberg, Spirand, & Cumberland, 2001). In places
like Japan, China, and Nepal, for example, scholars find that because certain cultures value different kinds of emotions and the expression of these emotions, parents use specific techniques to socialize their children to match the emotional norms of that culture (Matsumoto, 1996; Cole & Tamang, 1998). While some scholars have explored differences between American culture and Japanese culture in terms of emotional socialization, it stands to reason that dominant or majority American emotional socialization may differ in important ways from middle class or upwardly mobile Black parents’ emotional socialization strategies.

### 3.5 Transmission of Beliefs through Parent-Child Interactions

Prior to the establishment of a romantic or intimate interaction, an individual’s beliefs, attitudes, and expectations of romantic relationships exist. Amato (1999) advances an intergenerational transmission approach to the transmission of beliefs between parents and children. In his view, the attitudes, beliefs, values, and behaviors in the family of origin can be passed to children. This explanation has been used to connect early family interactions and experiences to later beliefs in romantic relationships.

Some researchers have identified two factors, transmission of beliefs and observational learning, which I will discuss in the next section, as consequential for how individuals think about and engage in romantic relationships (Masarik, Conger, Martin, Donnellan, Masyn, & Lorenz, 2012; Trotter 2007; Waters & Cummings 2000). Scholars
found the parent-child relationship to influence the development of romantic relationships among youths (Furman, Simon, Shaffer, & Bouchey, 2002, Kan, McHale, & Crouter, 2008; Shulman & Scharf, 2000). Through socialization practices and parent-child interactions, children take on constructive attitudes that help them develop healthy romantic relationships later on, or individuals adopt limiting or harmful beliefs that negatively influence their ability to establish healthy relationships. Furman et al. (2002) found that individuals who have positive experiences with their parents during childhood “tend to have optimistic cognitive maps and to hold constructive beliefs of romantic relationships”. Their research suggested that children perceive themselves as being desirable and lovable and others they interact with as trustworthy and available. These beliefs are found to be conducive to more ideal romantic relationships (Furman et al., 2002). At the same time, scholars find evidence of the intergenerational transmission of the influence of negative sentiments by parents about romantic ties and relationships (Amato, 1996; Bryant & Conger 2002). Children whose parents hold negative sentiments or beliefs about romantic unions and relationships are more likely to hold similar negative beliefs about relationships.

Accordingly, characteristics of young adults’ families of origin have provided a common explanation for the kinds of beliefs that individuals hold about romantic relationships. Individuals who were raised in intact families evaluate divorce more negatively than young adults from families that are divorced (Amato & Booth 1991;
Riggio & Weiser 2008). Moreover, children of divorced parents are more pessimistic about lifelong marriages and have lower expectations about relationship success (Amato & Booth 1991; Riggio & Weiser 2008). Sprecher & Metts (1998) find that women with divorced parents hold less idealistic views in their own romantic relationship than women who have married parents. According to Sanders et al. (1999) the children of divorced couples are more likely to engage in higher levels of conflict and express a negative affect in their own romantic interactions. And the adult children of divorced parents are at greater risk for divorce, or for having non-marital romantic ties that are more unstable and distressed than those whose parents did not divorce (Amato 1996; Amato & Booth 1997; Sanders et al. 1999). The children of divorced parents tend to hold more negative assessments about marriage and family, and they are more cautious in their approach to romantic relationships (Vagelisti, Reis, & Fitzpatrick, 2002). Of course, divorce is not the only aspect of family structure within the family of origin that influences children and adolescent’s beliefs about intimate relationships, but it is consequential for the ways individuals think about and engage in romantic relationships.

In a study of mostly white undergraduate college students, Weigel (2007) examined the kinds and influences of commitment related messages young people received in their families of origin. His study found that individuals with divorced or unhappy parents reported receiving messages that suggested that “relationships are not
permanent”, “one must approach relationships with caution”, and “relationships are beset by lack of trust and fidelity”, and “less likely to report gaining messages such as marriages is enduring, relationships need love and happiness, and relationships should be partnerships.” Simons, Simons, Lei, & Landor (2011) examined the relationship challenges of Black Americans and find that relational schemas which refers to assumptions or beliefs individuals hold of themselves, others, and social relationships, influence the way that people think about and approach romantic relationships. They argued that Blacks are exposed to higher rates of harsh parenting, among other racialized experiences, and as a result, develop a distrustful view or belief about romantic relationships.

Existing literature on romantic relationships takes a developmental approach to understanding romantic interactions and commitments. Bryant & Conger (2002) contend that family of origin directly or indirectly shapes interactions in romantic relationships, and competencies that promote relational success can be located in childhood and adolescent familial experiences. Amato and Booth (2001) found that young adults imitate the behaviors they observe their parents enact in their romantic relationships and marriages. Children are placed at an increased risk for developing problems in romantic relationships in adulthood through a process called social learning and in particular, observational learning. Observing violence, for example, in childhood is associated with an increased risk for violence toward and aggression towards a romantic partner.
O’Leary and Cascardi (1998) reported that children who are raised in families with higher than average rates of interpersonal violence are at a greater risk for being aggressive toward a romantic partner. Conger, et al. (2000) state that youth involved in cohabitating relationships were from homes with four factors: less well educated parents, parents who were less nurturing or involved in their interactions with youth, parents who were more hostile and less warm and supportive in their marital interactions, and siblings who were less warm and supportive in their behaviors toward the youth.

Nelson (2001) reported that children who are exposed to significant amounts of parental conflict, stress, or disagreement, especially ongoing or unresolved conflicts, are less likely to believe that conflicts in relationships can actually be solved or worked through. In fact, some scholars support the idea that parent conflict is the primary factor that influences children’s relationships in adulthood. In fact, the effect of parent conflict might actually be stronger than parental divorce (Cui, Fincham, & Pasley, 2008).

Scholars have noted the types of messages about commitment they learned from their families may be related to their beliefs about romantic relationships in adulthood (Weigel 2007). It follows that an examination of the influence of family of origin on romantic partnering processes is important for understanding Black women’s beliefs and actions in romantic relationships. Specifically, I explore the specific messaging that
respondents received across with respect to intimate relationships and class mobility and/or class reproduction.

**3.6 Interactional Characteristics Among Parents in the Family of Origin**

In addition to socialization strategies and explicit messages communicated from parents to their children, another factor of interest in this study is interactional processes through which beliefs are transmitted from parents to their children. For children and adolescents, the family of origin is the context in which they learn what is appropriate or inappropriate in personal relationships and how they and others should be treated.

Existing literature has placed a substantial amount of attention on the nature and quality of interaction between parents and the influence of parental interaction on children’s future romantic partnering beliefs. Scholars find that interactional processes in the family of origin are consequential for the ways individuals think about relationships (Bryant and Conger 2002, eds Vangelisti and Fitzpatrick 2002). For example, emotional dispositions including neuroticism are found to exacerbate or increase the presence of these kinds of traits in other members of the family of origin. Sanders et al (1999) argued that a child will emulate the interactional styles present in the family of origin. Conger and Bryant (2002) also contended that positive or negative sentiments or statements about romantic relationships in the family of origin “predicts a similar cognitive or attributional style” in later adult romantic relationships. Essentially,
children adopt or model the ways that their parents think about or engage in romantic relationships. If a child observes generally positive interactions between his or her parents in the family of origin, he or she is more likely to have positive beliefs about romantic love and relationships and to attribute positive or optimistic meanings to romantic relationships. They are more likely to conclude that the quality or characteristics of romantic relationships are generally positive. On the other hand, the opposite is true. If a child observes consistently hostile, insecure, or consistently negative interactions in his or her parents’ relationship or between a parent and a significant others, he or she is more likely to develop a negative attribution to romantic commitments.

In addition to developing positive or negative beliefs about romantic relationships based on the interactional characteristics of the family of origin, Conger and Bryant (2002) contended that a child imitates or carries forward the behaviors he or she observes in the interactions between their parents, parents and siblings, and between siblings. A lack of dependability or conflicts in the parent-child relationship can also contribute to children developing negative beliefs or representations of relationships. The presence of these interactional characteristics can cause them to think of romantic partners or relationships as undependable or untrustworthy (Bryant & Conger, eds. Vangelisti & Fitzpatrick 2002). Expressions of positive affect and the avoidance of conflict and negativity are positively related to marital satisfaction and inversely related
to marital distress (Conger, Rueter, & Elder 1999; Karney & Bradbury 1995; Weiss & Heyman 1997). It is important to note that the absence of familial challenges such as aggression, negativity, or conflict does not necessarily imply that young adults learned skills that promote positive relationships (Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder 2000). Unless there is specific evidence of parents teaching their children specific emotional and communication based strategies, such as negotiating, expressing concern or appreciation, or how to resolve conflicts in healthy, productive ways, it is difficult to ascertain whether or not children learn these beliefs or competencies in their families of origin. The analyses that follow examined the relationship between social class of origin and the transmission of beliefs through parental messaging and interactional characteristics in the family of origin.

### 3.7 Methods

Data sources include in-depth interviews with 52 Black middle-class women across eight U.S. cities. These interviews collected data on lessons respondents reported learning from their parents’ romantic relationship and how this knowledge informs their own beliefs, values, and actions in the context of romantic lives. I seek to identify patterns in the transmission of knowledge process by women who are either (1) upwardly mobile or (2) middle class. Based on the aforementioned characteristics of interactional characteristics by class, I expect that there would be differences between
middle class and upwardly mobile respondents with respect to the kinds of advice, guidance, and exposure to parental problem solving and/or conflict that respondents experienced in childhood and adolescence.

3.7.1 Data Collection

Black middle class women in the United States were identified through snowball sampling techniques. All of the respondents were between the ages of 30 and 40 years old and either unmarried (33) or married (19) and mothers (17) or childless (35). 32 respondents were raised in middle class families of origin and 18 participants were raised in upwardly mobile households. I conducted interviews with respondents in nine cities (Durham, NC; Chapel Hill, NC; Charlotte, NC; New York, NY; Chicago, IL; Detroit, MI; Washington, D.C.; Los Angeles, CA; and Atlanta, GA.

Each in-person interview was conducted from April 2017 to July 2017. All of these conversations took place in-person in respondent’s homes, workplaces, or coffee shops or restaurants. I conducted each interview, which lasted approximately 1.5-2 hours.

The semi-structured interview was ideal to use to answer this set of research questions as it uses questions and prompts to engage the respondent in a rich conversation about their parents’ relationship, beliefs and values about romantic partnering, and the messages transmitted to the respondents. Questions included a
combination of theoretically-driven questions informed by extant constructs in relevant empirical literatures and questions informed by respondents’ insights as new topics unaddressed in the extant literature emerged in respondents’ accounts, following standard procedures for constructing grounded theory (Charmaz 2003). Respondents were asked a series of questions including their parents’ relationship and family of origin, the relationship formation process including the initiation, evaluation, maintenance, and permanence or dissolution of a recent romantic interaction, and their beliefs and attitudes about romantic partnering (see: Appendix 1). The questions were designed to draw out respondents’ reports of their family of origin including family structure, the nature of their parents romantic relationship, the messaging or beliefs that one or both parents transmitted to them during childhood and adolescence, and details of the process of racial or gender socialization that parents or caregivers engaged in while respondents were growing up. This approach facilitated the collection of detailed accounts of [romantic partnering and messages transmitted] based in the lived experiences of individual respondents, while making it possible to also draw systematic comparisons across individuals and groups. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.
3.7.2 Data Analysis

Transcribed interviews were iteratively coded following a modified grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss 1990). First, each interview was coded line-by-line in order to identify the detailed actions involved in respondents’ telling of specific events and experiences (Charmaz, 2003; Glaser 1978). This approach facilitated the identification of thematic categories centering on the precise kinds of advice and guidance (messaging) parents gave their daughters. These categories were not mutually exclusive, as many respondents reported receiving two or more kinds of specific relationship advice, guidance, or messaging from their parents.

Four categories captured the messages that respondents’ perceived that their parents emphasized during childhood, adolescence, and even young adulthood with respect to romantic relationships. In addition to the four categories that capture the kinds of messages and explicit guidance or advice that respondents recall their parents communicating to them, I also identified whether respondents viewed their parents’ communication styles as emphasizing or de-emphasizing the importance of messaging in their lives through their actions, interactions, and what I call “silence.” Silence refers to the topics, specific occurrences, and reflections respondents had where they recall their parents did not provide specific guidance about love or dating, overlooked key moments to interject in their daughter’s relationships, ignored the development of romantic feelings or relationships altogether, or articulated that they assumed their
daughters had knowledge of specific aspects of the romantic relationship process including dating, relationship formation, and sex. Finally, I identified ways that respondents reconciled their perception of the quality of their parents’ romantic relationships with how they approached the practical work of establishing, sustaining, and leaving romantic partnerships.

After I identified these categories and processes, I compared these with the themes that I identified in interview transcripts, analytic memos, jottings, and notes. I used these categories to compare key phrases, processes, and experiences across cases. This process also helped me identify gaps in the data. Finally, I used constant comparison to compare cases to identify similarities and differences at two levels of analytic work – statements and experiences in the same interview and assertions and experiences between interviews (Charmaz, 2003; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

3.8 Findings

There is no evidence from any of the fifty-two interviews that respondents were thoughtfully instructed or guided in adolescence or young adulthood how to establish a healthy, loving, promising romantic relationship, but they did receive other kinds of messages which I elaborate on in the sections that follow. Specifically, I refer to explicit conversations that include guidance or advice about how to determine one’s relational or emotional needs, establish an emotional connection, develop trust with romantic
partner, identify signs or as one respondent calls them “red flags” in romantic relationships, know when it is appropriate to transition into a committed relationship, or end an existing intimate arrangement. Without exception, respondents report feeling unprepared to navigate romantic relationships with some going so far as to report feeling like they had to “wing it” their whole lives. Despite the lack of preparation by parents, some respondents do report receiving advice from cousins and friends. One respondent mentions that her cousin admonished her to start shaving her legs in high school; to her, this action was taken in order to make herself physically appealing to her male classmates. Another respondent specifically describes giving and receiving advice with her girlfriends as an exercise in futility. She said emphatically, “It was the blind leading the blind.” When a different respondent was probed about the lack of guidance her parents gave her, she explained, “This was pre Google, okay. There was no YouTube. Like there was no source of information other than my misinformed friends, you know?”.

Four categories of romantic or intimate messaging emerged from these analyses: practical, protective, principled, and progressive. It is important to note that these four kinds of messages are not mutually exclusive, and several respondents received more than one kind of messaging. For example, Zora reports that her parents emphasized two messages to her about dating and relationships. The first and most salient message was a practical emphasis on financial security; her mother, specifically, advised her to
partner with a man who would trust her with his money and in turn, her future family’s finances. The second was religious messaging; her parents consistently admonished her to “marry a Christian man”. Again, while some respondents clearly perceived one specific kind of messaging being most strongly emphasized or modeled in their family of origin and by their parents, others clearly articulate that their parents emphasized two or more kinds of beliefs or advice about romantic relationships.

The first category practical includes messages that emphasize the functional, stable, and resilient aspects of romantic relationships that support or contribute to social mobility. The second category protective includes messages respondents recall their parents emphasizing negative or fear based messages about romantic relationships and sex and sexuality. These messages were often based on their parents’ own relational experiences or conclusions they had drawn from observing others’ romantic interactions. Some parents communicate to their daughters that partnering with the wrong person can be detrimental, and in some instances can alter their life plans. These messages communicate a general threat to personal happiness and potential threat to social mobility and future security. The third category includes messages in which parents generally emphasize principled messages. These messages were most often rooted in Christian dogmas about faith, purity, sex, and marriage, and in some cases, communicated by parents who were members of clergy. These messages actually pay little attention to social mobility and instead narrowly focus on faith, purity, and
devotion to God. The fourth category focuses on messages that promote upward social mobility through messages about progression. Some respondents reported their parents encouraged them to focus on their academic and professional plans. In many instances, this emphasis was so strong that parents actually encouraged their daughters to avoid romantic ties or connections altogether, and instead, to focus their energy and efforts on educational pursuits and career aspirations. It is important to mention again that these categories are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they overlap, as do instances of avoidance or silence, for many of the respondents in this study.

The messaging respondents received only included advice as to when to enter into romantic relationships, and no guidance was provided as to whether and how to sustain or exit romantic relationships. In the absence of practical advice about how to sustain and exit romantic relationships, respondents used their parents’ relationships as a point of reference as they sought to either emulate their parent’s relationship successes or avoid the challenges and/or traumas that characterized these relationships in their decisions about when and how to establish, sustain, and exit romantic relationships of their own.

### 3.8.1 Practical Messaging for Romantic Love

For eleven respondents, the emphasis their parents placed romantic relationships is practical and functional in nature. This advice focuses on the stability, security, and
permanence of a romantic union. Two upwardly mobile respondents (4 percent) and nine middle class (17 percent) respondents report that their parents gave them practical messaging about dating or romantic relationships. Both middle class and upwardly mobile respondents report receiving messages about romantic relationships that emphasized the importance of practicality, financial security, stable family formation, and perseverance through difficult times.

Kendra, a married 32-year-old who lives in New York City, comes from a more stable, traditional, middle to upper middle class Black family. Both of her parents are physicians. The relationship advice she received from her parents emphasized familial stability and security. Kendra’s parents encouraged her to find a stable partner and raise a good family, while her godmother pushed her to find a man “with some money”.

When I inquired about the kinds of advice she received from her parents, Kendra recalls, “Yes. I remember my mom kind of telling me, you know, I picked your dad, because I knew he’d be a great dad and I knew that, okay, he might not’ve been basically like THE thing or THE this, but I knew he was gonna be a stable partner and raise a good family. So just think about that. And I remember my mom telling me that for sure.” Again, Kendra’s mother’s advice stressed the creation of a stable home life.

Zora is a 31-year-old accountant, expectant mother, and wife. She grew up in a middle-class, two-parent household in and just outside of Detroit, Michigan. She recalls her parents having a very normal, healthy, productive relationship. She says, “There
was love in my house, and I think that just emanated from our extended families”. Zora did not observe her parents argue until she was an adult. She says, “I feel like they did a good job of showing us like couples will have disagreements but there’s never anything that’s like I’m yelling or any kind of abuse ... verbal or physical”. She articulates feeling like her upbringing was filled with a lot of normalcy. When I asked her to elaborate she says, “...The love we felt and not wanting for anything”.

Zora’s parents taught her that the number one reason why couples break up is disagreements over finances. As a child and adolescent, she recalls her father handing his check over to her mother, and her mother managing the family’s finances. She says of her parents, “… It was never a conversation of my money or her money, it was always our money…” Her mother emphasized that if a man cannot trust you with his money, then he is not the right man for you. Zora’s mother and father also imparted to her not to need her guy — to look at her partner as if he is an add-on or an additional piece to her puzzle. In her own marriage, Zora has taken her parents’ advice to heart. While she earns more than her husband, she is proud of the fact that they pool their resources and approach their family finances from the perspective of “our money”.

Zora, Kendra, and others recall practical or functional messaging around romantic partnering. They do not, however, report that their parents gave them comprehensive advice or guidance about how to engage in romantic relationships, or
how to develop trust, happiness, and commitment in the context of romantic interactions.

### 3.8.2 Progression: Messaging for Social Mobility

The career an individual pursues determines his or her working conditions, salary, benefits, job security, opportunities for promotion or advancement, job satisfaction, and to some extent, their children’s life chances. Five respondents report their parents emphasized schooling and education, self-sufficiency, and encouraged them to focus on their professional careers. I refer to this kind of messaging as *progression*. Specifically, parents are primarily concerned with their daughters either exceeding their level of education and occupational status, or they are interested in their daughters maintaining or improving their class standing of origin. One upwardly mobile respondent and four middle class respondents report that their parents encouraged them to focus on their educational and occupational success instead of romantic pursuits.

Aaliyah was raised in and just outside of Toronto, Ontario. She is one of three children born to West Indian parents in Canada. Of her family and her upbringing she says, “We were like the Carribbean-Canadian Huxtables, except my parents weren’t doctors and lawyers”. Her parents often hosted gatherings for family and friends. Aaliyah, a now 38-year-old attorney, fondly recalls the rhythm of music, great good,
laughter, and joy throughout her home during these family gatherings. In terms of her relationship with her father, she said, “He decided that I would be the one”. In her own words, she says that he poured everything he had into her intellectually. He saw Aaliyah becoming an intellectual and going far with respect to her educational and professional pursuits.

She recalled attending a family friend’s event and her mother beaming with pride telling family and friends, “My girls don’t have any boyfriends. My girls aren’t interested in boys”. Specifically, her mother’s favorite phrase was “Don’t study no man, study your books”. It is very clear that Aaliyah’s mother prioritized her educational and academic priorities over Aaliyah gaining experience in developing romantic or relational connections. Her mother also advised her, “Don’t worry about guys. Don’t worry about boys. You’re a smart girl. You’re going to go far in life.” This statement suggests that Aaliyah’s parents not only prioritized her potential for upward social mobility, they also viewed dating, pursuing a relationship, or pursuing a love interest as a competing interest or in conflict with her educational and professional pursuits. Moreover, Aaliyah says that her preparation for college was somewhat different than her non-black peers. “There wasn’t this focus for me like go to school and get a husband…” In other words, Aaliyah believes that her non-black colleagues were encouraged to go to college and find a partner or husband. Her parents, however, wanted her to focus on getting a college degree and pursue her dreams of becoming an attorney.
Angela is a 33-year-old freelance writer and editor who is currently cohabitating with her partner of three years in New York City. She graduated from a prestigious HBCU and is a proud member of one of the Historically Black Greek Letter Organizations. She was raised by her married parents and lived with an older sister in Detroit. She described her father as the family’s breadwinner and says that he did everything in his power to provide for her while she was growing up. When Angela was 14 years old, her mother tragically passed away, and her father, who never remarried, raised her.

As Angela reflected on her upbringing and her relationship with her father, she recalls that he encouraged her to put herself in a position to take care of herself without the support or presence of a man. “He was kinda like, you go to school, you go to college, you get a good degree, and you make sure you take care of yourself…almost instilled in that like… independent woman, you don’t need a man.” Here, Angela’s father’s messaging served two-purposes. First, he emphasized that she should pursue educational and professional goals, in other words, her own upward social mobility. Second, his advice actually de-emphasized Angela’s normatively developing interests in dating, love, and sex. Angela remembered that her father never gave her any advice about dating. When she asked her father for advice once, he cautioned her, “Most men, they ain’t shit…. If you want one, go ahead but like, you know, you’ll be okay either way”. In addition to insisting on his daughter’s independence, Angela’s father also
imparted a sense that she should be wary of the intentions of men who might come into her life in a romantic way.

Esther was born and raised in a two-parent household alongside two brothers in Southern California. A surgeon in training, Esther earned her medical doctorate and MBA at a prestigious university in the Midwest. Both of her parents earned doctorate degrees – her mother is a professor and her father a minister. From them she learned the importance of loyalty and the power of love. She described them as the emotional and financial pillars of their large, extended family. When she reflects on her adolescence and the kinds of advice her parents gave her, Esther describes them as “serious” about their children directing their energy to educational pursuits.

Esther reported that her parents encouraged her to have friends, but never urged her to interest in romantic relationships or gave her any advice about dating. When asked specifically about the advice or guidance that her parents gave her about love and relationships, Esther says, “My parents treated it like this thing that would magically happen, but never told me how. My mother advised me to finish school. Figure out what you wanna do. Get your job. Be able to take care of yourself… and then, I don’t know if she realized my professional life would take as long as it has… My mom tries not to perpetuate negative stereotypes or beliefs, so now she doesn’t say anything.”

With respect to the advice and guidance she received from her father, he told Esther, “When the time is right, the time is right”.

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Anastasia, whose story I return to in the next section, describes that while her father contributed financially to her upbringing, she saw her mother working. In particular she recalls that her mother communicated to her that it was important that she develop a sense of self-reliance. Now a successful attorney, wife, and mother to a one-year-old daughter, Anastasia reflects on the values her parents instilled in her, and she says, “It was an independence thing.” She recalls that her parents taught her to go to college, get a career, and be able to provide for herself.

Anastasia’s parents did actively and intentionally prepare her for social mobility. She recalled instances where her parents communicated about the academic and social activities that she would participate in. Her father often deferred to her mother, but he was always included in the decision-making process. In terms of the schools she attended, Anastasia never attended a traditional public school. Her parents made sacrifices so that she could attend magnet and Catholic schools throughout their childhood and adolescence. She was groomed to go to college and get a really good job. Anastasia’s parents wanted the very best for their daughter and their emphasis on independence, self-sufficiency, and success inspired her to achieve her academic and professional goals.
3.8.3 Protective Messaging for Romantic Relationships

During our interview in her corner office, Lindsey explained that her parents’ relationship was sometimes fraught with tension, in part, because her parents owned a business that they operated together. When I asked her to tell me what kinds of advice her parents gave her about dating or relationships, Lindsey replied:

... My dad, on the other hand, is someone very similar to my aunts, very strict relationship views. Like for example, his view is he would always say this to me growing up, all men are roaches. Direct quote. And they really just wanta have sex with you and be a notch, have a notch on your belt. Like they wanta make you a notch on their belt. And so that really, that scared me. And we never really had a conversation about sex. We had, like he tried to talk to me about it one time and it was really awkward and then we never talked about it again. But his, his harsh view about men, I think really stemmed from the fact that he was a little bit of a dog in his past. And I think it’s, I think that’s kind of true to some degree, that men especially when they’re young and not mature, they don’t treat women in the best way and you really have to protect yourself and your sexuality and for me, that made me so afraid of sex. I was, I was a virgin until I was 28 years old.

Currently living in Southern California with her fiancé and young son, Jordan was raised by her mother in a middle-class household. Jordan was largely without her father’s influence due to his absence and incarceration throughout her childhood and adolescence, and more recently she has maintained only sporadic contact with him during her adult life.

While she was growing up, she reports that she never witnessed her mother in a successful, enduring romantic relationship. Jordan mentioned that her mother dated and had some fairly serious relationships, but nothing that really stands out in her mind.
Growing up in her family and with her community of friends and extended family, it was not out of the ordinary to see single black women with children. She says that all of the women she interacted with growing up were single – aunts, cousins, and her friend’s mothers.

Jordan attended two suburban private schools, a prestigious HBCU, joined a Black Greek Letter Organization, and has achieved great success in the entertainment industry. When asked about the counsel her mother gave her while she was growing up, Jordan says, echoes another respondent’s sentiments, “There were no conversations… I feel like I’ve been winging it my whole life.” Later on in our interview, Jordan actually shares a story about her mother catching her with a boy in her closet when she was just 15-years-old. She says that there was no real conversation about the incident other than her mother admonished her, “Don’t have unprotected sex”. Simultaneously then, Jordan received a cautionary message from her mother about sex and sexual intimacy, and still receives very little guidance, in other words silence, on matters of dating or even boundaries in romantic relationships during adolescence. Her mother was undoubtedly concerned with the potential consequences associated with unprotected sex, including an unplanned pregnancy, which could potentially derail her daughter’s professional and academic goals, or contracting a sexually transmitted disease, which could potentially compromise her quality of life. When Jordan reflects on her adolescence and young adulthood, she feels like much of her understanding about relationships came from
friends and their relationships, but that she received little to no guidance from her mother or immediate family about these matters.

Anastasia’s parents’ relationship ended when she was 6 years old. Even though her parents never married, her mother’s decision she points out, Anastasia maintained a close relationship with her father throughout her life. With respect to romantic partnering, I ask Anastasia what kinds of advice or guidance her parents gave her, and she flatly says that her father did not give her any dating advice. Anastasia’s parents gave her explicit, sometimes, harsh, disapproving guidance about choosing or interacting with a romantic partner. They did not, however, give her clear guidance on how to pursue a healthy romantic relationship. Anastasia’s mother did not impart to her daughters what she would characterize as a “hopeless romantic” orientation to relationships. She told Anastasia, “Be careful who you date. Be careful who you marry. Don’t get pregnant, because you’re stuck with that dude forever.” Anastasia says that her mother did not have a lot of positive things to say about men. Her wariness led her and her younger sister to “put up a lot of walls” and to not be particularly trusting of men.

In her own dating experiences, Anastasia shared that she looked for men who treated her the way her father did. In terms of specific advice about dating or relationships, Anastasia recalls that her father did not want her to date, and only gave her advice about relationships once.
According to Anastasia, she was ‘the crowned jewel in the family’, had followed all the rules and done everything that was expected of her, but had not secured a marriage proposal from her partner. She had recently finished law school and had been in a relationship with her boyfriend for a number of years. Over the holidays, Anastasia’s then boyfriend joined her family for a holiday gathering in her hometown. After the family dinner, Anastasia’s father explicitly told her that he felt embarrassed for her that her partner had not yet asked her for her hand in marriage. After a brief exchange with Anastasia, her father flatly told her not to bring him around the family again.

What’s more, during Aaliyah’s childhood, a family friend’s daughter became pregnant at an early age. Upon learning this news, Aaliyah’s father warned her that she did not want to have sex, because she would get pregnant. She was 12-years-old at the time. Her father said, “Desiree is having a baby. You don’t want to have sex.” As a now, 38-year-old woman, Aaliyah laments that this was the only time that either one of her parents discussed sex with her.

Four upwardly mobile respondents (8 percent) and six middle class (12 percent) respondents report that their parents gave them gave messages of caution or warning about dating and romantic partnering. In general, parents who emphasize cautious messaging about romantic relationships, intimacy, and sex are concerned with protecting their daughters, and in some instances, preventing them from making the
same mistakes or misjudgments as they did in their own romantic interactions and relationships. Several respondents report that their parents advised them that they should be particularly cautious, almost to the point of wariness, about choosing romantic partners. While some parents encouraged their daughters to be careful, other parents actually communicate very negative messages about men or instilled messages that could contribute to feelings of fear or apprehension about romantic love and partnering.

3.8.4 Principled Messaging Around Faith, Religion, and Purity

This category focuses on religiously based messages mothers and fathers communicate to their daughters that actually de-emphasize romantic partnering, social mobility, and normative emotional and sexual developmental realities altogether, and instead focused on devotion to God and emphasized messages of sexual purity and celibacy. Four respondents mention that their fathers were ministers or pastors, and as a result, their messaging was primarily based on a biblical admonition to not have premarital sex, and to a lesser extent, not focus on romantic interest in boys or men during adolescence or young adulthood. Three upwardly mobile respondents (6 percent) and two middle class (4 percent) respondents report that their parents communicated religiously based messages about sex and dating.
Nina is 34-year-old, single, accomplished tech professional in New York City with diverse social and romantic connections. Her family boasts a long line of pastors, ministers, and deacons. Her parents divorced just two years ago, and she recalls receiving very conservative Christian messaging about romantic and sexual relationships during childhood and adolescence. Nina describes the following regarding about her parents, her religious formation, and the kinds of guidance her parents gave her about dating and sex:

So yeah he did become an ordained minister. My parents never went to the same church growing up. My dad was always Baptist. My mom was Methodist. My mom was not here for Baptist churches; I think she had some negative experience with Baptist ministers in this town. So she is not into it. My father later ended up joining a Methodist seminary when he did become ordained. So he ended up becoming a Methodist but they never went still to the same church. The whole time growing up my parents never went to the same church. Sometimes my mom a couple of times she would go to my dad’s church… We went to church as kids with my dad, because he was the one who would go more regularly. So yeah they were very religious, very conservative. We, I, at least had no sexual education really. I believe I was handed a book at one point. We all opted out of sex ed in school. None of us took it. Um… we just we got no information. It was weird. It was like don't talk to boys for the longest time. And then all of a sudden when I was 23, 22, 23, it was ‘So where’s your boyfriend?’ It was, it was nuts! Like a switch was flipped and it was just like, ‘Oh now I’m supposed to have a boyfriend?! Are you kidding?!’

Monica’s parents are married have been for at least 35 years. As she reflects on her childhood and upbringing, she mentions that difference was embrace and encouraged in their home. She grew up believing that there was someone for everyone. Of her own parents’ relationship, she states that the relationship was not healthy; in fact,
she describes it as “rough”. In her view, much of the guidance she received during adolescence was based in prudent, cautious messages.

Now 31-years-old and recently divorced, Monica recalled that could not socialize with the opposite sex during adolescence. So, she grew up having no male friends. Her very religious, upwardly mobile parents required her to listen to relationship series by prominent pastors. Monica reports that the guidance she received about abstinence and the fear associated with premarital sex was the extent of the advice she received. She says of her parents’ communication with her about sex, Monica stated, “It was awkward. And I felt disconnected and still didn’t leave me with a solid framework on how, I mean from an ideal standpoint… couldn’t apply it to my interpersonal relationships”.

During adolescence, several respondents articulate that their parents directed them to not have sex and they learned through participation in religious community and services that they should not have sex until they were married. What I call the Christian purity ethos deeply impacts respondents long after adolescence. Several respondents, upwardly mobile and middle class alike, report feeling guilty and shameful about engaging in premarital sex.

Carmen reported that it took her a very long time to overcome the feelings of shame and discomfort that she felt during and after sex. Despite the fact that Carmen knew that her older sister was conceived before her parents married, her mother who is
particularly religious communicated to her that she should wait until she was married to have sex at all.

LesLeigh: Okay. So we haven’t talked a lot about sex but I am quite curious about… you mentioned that your mom was really like religious. And for a lot of religious people, sex is something you reserve for marriage, wait as long as you can... Has religion or spirituality informed the way that you view or engage in sex?

Carmen: Oh, yeah, oh, my god. Yeah, and I kinda, for myself, I had to like develop my own like relationship with sex and what it means to me. I will tell you that when I was younger, like sex was never to happen until you’re married. Don’t do it. If you do, you’re going to hell. Tomorrow. Immediately. In the hole. Ain’t no help for you back.

Later in our conversation about the messaging she received about sex and how it influenced her beliefs and feelings about sex as an adult, Carmen recalled that she’s struggled to feel comfortable and secure in her sexual relationships. For a good portion of her adult life, she believed that sex was bad. She has gone through periods of abstinence, struggles to reach an orgasm, and overwhelming feelings of guilt. She said:

So and I think like, so going back to like my relationship with sex, like I had a very like binary feeling about sex, like sex is bad and that went with me through college and high school. And you know, in my adult life, so I’ve tried abstinence. I was abstinent for like a year and a half and just like around sex, even if I had sex, afterward, I would just feel so guilty. And I really think, this is real personal but I really think it was the reason why I couldn’t like reach an orgasm because it would just, I would just feel like I was committing the biggest atrocity ever in life. Like I told my friend this once and she thought it was hilarious. You know, how you can like that exit sign, in my mind, as I’m engaging in sex, I would have like, imagine if you put an S in front of that exit sign, so it said ‘Sexit’. That would flash in my mind. I was like completely traumatized by my upbringing and I just had to like come to terms with that, like sex is not bad. It’s human. Not going to hell. It doesn’t mean that you’re gonna like be punished for it. You
won’t get pregnant every time you have sex. You won’t catch an STD tomorrow. So like all these negatives and then I felt like everything bad that happened to me in my life was because like I had sex.

On one hand, it is possible to interpret some of this advice as strictly religious and spiritual in nature. According to many Christians, any sexual thought or act that is committed outside of the context of a heterosexual marriage is sin. At the same time, however, some advice around spirituality and purity could also be tied to some fear that respondents’ parents have about an unwanted pregnancy or that developing a romantic connection to the wrong partner might derail their daughter’s professional pathways. It is clear, however, that for most women their parents do not actually communicate that message. Instead, they simply tell them do not have sex as it is a sin. Still, it is possible then that this messaging serves both a principled and a protective purpose at the same time.

Despite the prevalence of messaging about premarital sex, several respondents describe growing up in very religious households and contexts, receiving cautionary messages about sex and sexuality, and still choosing to engage in fulfilling sexual relationships. Trystin said:

Yes, my mother was very vocal about sex. And not having sex before marriage. I had a promise ring when I was maybe 16 or so. Like you promise to save yourself for marriage. That was a major message. I did not follow said message but it was a major message as far as advising. The other thing she said, when I was in college, I started dating someone and I told her that I was sexually active. She told me I had to marry the person. [laughs]
It is clear that these respondents received very explicit, deeply religious advice from their parents about romantic partnering. For some, this advice influenced the way that women think about and engage in sexual relationships. Some respondents report experiencing feelings of guilt and shame around premarital sex, while others rejected their parents’ religious guidance or advice entirely and pursued sexual intimacy with romantic partners.

### 3.9 Instances of Parents’ Silence on Matters of Love and Romance

Maya works in business management at a university and is currently completing her PhD. When I asked her about the kinds of advice she received from her parents about romantic relationships, she says, “I never remember having even like the traditional birds and the bees talk with my parents…”. She pauses and reflects on being 38 and single and wistfully asks, “How did I miss this conversation?”. Later she goes on to say, “…Growing up, never did we have a conversation about romantic relationships. My parents never really talked about their relationship, kinda woes. Nothing”.

Summer is a thirty-nine year old who holds a MBA from a prestigious business school and works in the finance industry. She was born and raised in California and currently resides in Atlanta, Georgia with her husband and two daughters. Her parents have been married for 41 years and recently relocated to Georgia to support Summer and her husband in raising their young family. She warmly recalls her childhood and
her parent’s relationship. Her father worked for many years in the aviation industry and her mother directed her own entrepreneurial business from home. During our conversation, Summer lamented over the lack of relational advice or messaging she received as an adolescent:

LesLeigh: Okay. While you were growing up, did your parents give you any advice about dating?

Summer: No. No. I was, we definitely never had like a talk. I, when I was say 15, I was allowed to have company over, like in the TV room, in the kitchen, in the family room. That was it. When I was 16, I was allowed to like go somewhere, like I had a license so I was allowed to go to somebody’s house if they were preapproved and the parents had been and all that. There wasn’t really any advice given. My dad told me, he was like, “Well, we didn’t think we needed to talk to you. We knew you already knew.” I was like, what did I know and where would I get this information? This was pre Google, okay. There was no YouTube. Like there was no source of information other than my misinformed friends, you know?”

Some respondents’ parents assumed that their daughters had a working knowledge of how relationships developed, and therefore, they elected not to engage with them about them at all. It is evident from Summer’s comments that her parents took a hands-off approach to guiding her into romantic involvement in any meaningful way. In fact, there is a presumption of knowledge on the part of her father. He assumed that his daughter gathered knowledge on her own, independent of himself and his wife that would give her the knowledge and context she needed to engage in romantic relationships in an informed, conscientious way.
Similarly, thirty-five year old mother and divorcee, Candace expressed regret, “I wasn’t necessarily taught what red flags were. So I don’t know… women have to learn them as they go and I think that’s hard, especially you know, when they start dating.” Immediately after this assessment, she said that she feels like there is some literature developed with adolescent women in mind that gives them relationship advice, tips, and warnings. But she said, “We didn’t get it at Union”, referring to the magnet high school she attended. She elaborated a bit more on this point and implied that she believed that this literature was made available to girls who grew up in low-income or economically disadvantaged neighborhoods, but expressed a sense that it was not available at well-resourced schools. In other words, she felt that by virtue of attending a school comprised of many middle class parents, adolescents were not provided with the same guidance that other young people in traditional public schools received. In her view, if she did not receive this kind of information from her parents or in the curriculum at the schools she attended, where would she have learned how to engage in a healthy romantic relationship?

Joi, a 31-year old, single woman who is currently a doctoral candidate at a public university in the Northeast, explained that she specifically asked her mother for dating advice. Much to her surprise, her mother replied, “Nah, I’m cool”. She says that over the course of her life, neither of her parents have ever had a conversation with her about finding the right romantic partner, dating, sex, marriage, or having her own children.
During our interview, she seemed a bit dismayed that her upwardly mobile parents, who experienced pretty significant relationship trials of their own, were reluctant or hesitant to try to protect her or her siblings from making the same mistakes. For Joi, Maya, Candace, Summer, and others, their parents’ silence and lack of guidance around love, dating, emotional connections, and sex left them without an explicitly articulated framework to understand their own relational needs and how to identify the characteristics they needed a loving, stable romantic partner.

3.9.1 The Influence of Parents’ Interactional Characteristics on Partnering Behaviors

In addition the explicit, verbal messages that respondents received or did not receive in the form of advice, guidance, or counsel from their parents, Black daughters also engaged in a process of observational learning. Respondents learned certain patterns of behavior and beliefs about romantic relationships by witnessing their parents’ interactions during childhood and adolescence. Witnessing these patterns of behavior created a desire to emulate the kinds of romantic relationships their parents have, create new relational pathways and family forms, or some combination of these two approaches.

3.9.1.1 Supportive Parental Interactions

Larissa and her husband have a one-year old son. They are mid-career professionals and have been in a relationship since college. Her parents have been
married for more than forty years and emphasized that her mother and father balance each other and seek to be supportive partners in their marriage. When asked about her parent’s relationship, immediately responded with the following:

They were a team, you know what I mean? That’s just how they functioned. They sort of, I could just tell growing up that where one sort of had a weakness, the other would just pick it up. I don’t know if that was intentional, or if that’s what made them a good match... I can remember my mom making sure we were in a great school, and I can remember my dad making dinner. He cooked a lot and made sure we were well fed...I remember my mom talking to us about certain stuff. I mean she would really cover things like discipline, and I remember my dad being the one sort of telling us things about like life stories and consequences. You know, ‘This is what happens if you do this’. And my dad would tell the stories...It’s almost like they knew their strengths... that’s just how they are, they are just a team.

In terms of interaction, Larissa remembered her parent’s communication style being formal, direct, and respectful. While there relationship was not necessarily physically affectionate, her impression of their relationship as warm and loving is based on the fact that they were consistently respectful and how much they were willing to do for each other. She articulated more than once that her parents “take really good care of each other”.

In her own marriage, Larissa and her husband have emphasized healthy communication, prioritized taking care of each other, and she has taken on some of the roles that her mother assumed including managing her family’s finances. Larissa explains that she and her husband separated for about a year during their marriage. She
explained that generally they were happy, but their different approaches to managing
money and household finances became too much for the couple to bear. Larissa said:

So it’s funny, it was money… and it’s such an impersonal thing. Everyone talks
about you know sex and relationships and all these bumps in the road. Like what
really people really need to sit down and say is OK here’s a point of
contention… When it came to money. We just thought of it so differently the way
our families play. Our family believes that with each generation they should be
getting richer and richer and you set yourself up so that your kids aren’t under a
mountain of debt when they graduate from college. We believe that you should
be trying to buy property and keep it in the family. These are the things we think
about. His family didn’t have, didn’t, they were a blue-collar family. He was the
first one to get a college degree. And his concept of money was that you
worked… You get the money you, you pay, you spend it you use, it because you
have it now. Like when you have it it’s glorious. You’ve got to use it. And I’m like
don’t you get the money you spend as little of it as possible and put the rest of
the way.

Eve is 35 years old, single, and currently works in sales in Los Angeles,
California. Her parents are married and have been for 37 years. In her view, her parents
clearly love each other, even though they “get on each other’s nerves”, and they
demonstrate this love in a number of ways. During her childhood, adolescence, and
even now in her adult life, they are very affectionate, “act like a couple”, and express
care and concern for each other with their words and actions. One characteristic that she
was careful to mention is that her parents communicated really well with each other,
talked to each other a lot, and have never involved their children in any of their issues;
they did not fight in front of Eve or her siblings.
Through witnessing her parent’s relationship, Eve learned that healthy relationships require good communication, forgiveness, and compromise. In the romantic interactions she pursues in her life today, these are the qualities and characteristics she looks for in the men she dates. In terms of the specific advice that her parents gave her, our exchange follows:

Eve: Like just, you know, to make sure you find somebody who has good character and morals and loves you more than you love them, I think. Yeah, is that enough? No?

LesLeigh: No, that’s fine. Whatever advice they gave. Did your dad give you any advice?

Eve: He just said like make sure they have a good character. He’s always said that since like I was a kid.

LesLeigh: Okay. Do you feel like you learned any lessons about relationships from watching your parents?

Eve: Yeah, like I think about like communication is very important. And forgiveness and compromise.

LesLeigh: What in particular did you learn about forgiveness?

Eve: Because people are always gonna do things that disappoint you or make you mad. No one’s gonna be that perfect person for you, specifically because everyone needs different things. So just being able to articulate your feelings and just being able to forgive is absolutely critical in any relationship...

Diana, a now 40-year-old newlywed and mother-to-be described her parents as having a loving, stable marriage. She said, “My mom and dad were always very involved in our lives...I came from a very loving family. We were not spoiled with
material things. We were definitely not struggling... we were spoiled with unconditional love." She described her family as church going and “wholesome”. Diana describes her parents as having a healthy marriage, not perfect, but it is clear that they love each other and love their family deeply. She recalled her mother and father making significant sacrifices to ensure that she and her three siblings had a better quality of life than they had growing up on the South Side of Chicago.

She shared with me that her parents recently completed a thirty-day international trip together spanning two continents and several countries. Specifically, she characterized her parents’ relationship as having “serious love”; they find new and creative ways to maintain and sustain the bond of their marriage. She said, “...That has painted a very poignant backdrop for how I think about love. They created an image for me of something that I am just now being able to experience you know when it comes to love. I’m just now getting to know what its like to start my own family, but I think if I didn’t have them and that example, I don't know if, if I would’ve kept holding onto this is what I want and I won’t compromise...”. For Diana, her parents example motivated her to pursue the kind of love and commitment her parents demonstrate to this day.

For Violet, a 35-year-old former businesswoman and now full-time event planner, her childhood memories are filled with family first, faith, and community. Her parents have been married for 36 years. She describes her family as deeply loving and affectionate and her parents as committed to each other. Aspiring to have the kind of
romantic relationship she witnessed in her youth has been challenging for her as her most recent romantic partners have required a great deal of her time, resources, and emotional energy.

Of her parents, Violet said, “They’ve been married 36 years. So my mom stayed home up until maybe middle school for me. Very loving relationship, openly affectionate with each other. You know, very heavy emphasis on family first and on faith and community… We always had somebody staying with us, other people’s kids, grownups, even though we didn’t have a lot, there was always this sense of community, and taking care of others in our family and that you gave what you had to give, even if it wasn’t a lot or even if it was just a couch”. In her adult life, Violet reported that she has been in two serious romantic relationships. In her most recent romantic relationship, she was a source of stability and support for her partner, but she did not receive the kind of emotional or material support that she needed. So she ended the relationship. She said:

So you know, I made him take all of his stuff with him at the end of that summer so kind of took an additional two months to kinda fizzle out after that or for me to just kind of definitively say I’m done… I’ve kind of just said look, I need you to get your life together. I can’t even begin to think about this until you’re in a place where you are stable. So it was kind of me just, just feeling like I didn’t have anything left to give.

3.9.2 Strained Parental Interactions

Gail is a 31-year-old mother to a one-year old daughter and administrator at a high school in her native Southern California. Her parents have been married for 36
years, and from the outside looking in, her parents looked like “The Huxtables”. From her perspective, however, she described her father as controlling, combative, and argumentative. She shared that her father has stalked her mother, threatens to kill himself if her mother tries to leave the marriage, and struggles with substance abuse.

Gail described her mother as codependent and believes that she “needs to be needed”.

She characterized her parent’s relationship as “complicated”. She said:

You know, to the outside world, or outside people, Roy calls them the Huxtables. Like my dad presents so well, intentionally. It’s a cover. Because he’s angry and he has substance abuse issues and so there’s this mask that he puts on for everybody else. But at the same, and then I watched them and somehow, it appears to have some type of authentic friendship interaction. They travel the world but I’ve also seen them travel and my dad is, he’s, he’s verbally abusive. He’s demeaning. He’s, he’s controlling. So I don’t know how she does it in terms of going to Spain with this man and he’s so demanding and so aggressive but she stays and she deals with it and I don’t get it. And there are moments, I’m like, maybe you guys are friends but how can you be friends? So it’s weird. Like you know, they’re, it’s just very interesting. So it’s complicated. And as a child, I don’t think I... I realized in high school that all this was going on. Not realized. I could admit it. I knew something was going on when I was little but my brother, we’re exactly four years apart so when he went to college, I was in high school so then I was by myself in the house with the two of them, I can, I see it. And Brian’s [her brother] the buffer...

Gail described “trying too hard” to not be like her parents. Still, her 12-year relationship with her daughter’s father, which ended just last year, mirrored her parent’s relationship in several ways. Gail’s relationship with her daughter’s father was characterized by what she calls “constant conflict”. In addition to dealing with her
partner’s infidelity, she also says that she stayed in the relationship largely out of fear.

She reflected:

I guess, drama that relationship that I have with my parents and their relationship, some of it definitely mirrored what I’ve lived with Roy but in my head, I was just trying to fix it and overcome it even though there were some of those same characteristics. So yes, it existed. Again, I was too afraid to leave it. I was confident that I could overcome and fix it. But no, yeah, it was definitely there... Well, my therapist says I’m trying too hard not to be them. And that causes my own strife. So I thought I had learned lessons and then I found myself repeating them with Andre.

Growing up, Grace recalled witnessing some pretty significant challenges in her parent’s romantic relationship. Her father was the primary breadwinner, and her mother was a stay at home mom. Grace said, “So much of my life I believe that me and my mom have been really codependent on my dad. And you know it’s interesting. I was watching Bernie Madoff yesterday [a film on HBO]. It reminded me a lot of my dad in that exchange, but in that position. Father. Money. Purse holder. No power. Controller....”. Earlier in our conversation, I asked, “What are your parents like?”. Grace responded:

Yes. So, they actually have no intimate relationship that I visibly saw. They did, we did live in the same house. My dad always slept in the den downstairs. My mom always slept upstairs in the bedroom. Actually there was a point in my life maybe I was in early high school where my mom kicked my dad out.... like throwing his clothes outside and some slept in his office that night. And there, not too long after he went to buy a house in our neighborhood not too far away. In that case my kids may OK. But my mom has never been there hasn’t been allowed to go there actually for many many years. We didn't even talk about the house around her. It was a secret. And so my brother and me have also been complicit in this. We all have been, you know, living with this dual life of like my dad is doing what he wants but I guess still have some sort of relationship with my mom. I wouldn’t even call it companionship. I just don’t think... it was more
transactional. You know he would show us love... to pay for our bills you know. But that was it, you know maybe give us gifts on holidays like you know Valentine’s Day, Christmas, birthdays. But in terms of being emotionally present. You know for my mother, at least, that was never... I never saw that.

During her adolescent years, Grace admits that her mother confided in her about her father’s infidelities. She said, “…My mom opened up to me about how she and my father were at breakfast and the waitress had asked my dad where’s his wife was in front of her, or he would talk to other women friends on the phone, and when he got off the phone, he told them I love you in front of my mom. You know she would tell me things about how he was not faithful when I was younger...”.

In terms of her parents’ romantic advice, Grace recalled that her mother advised her to marry a man who earned a lot of money. Shirking this advice, Grace is currently cohabitating with a romantic partner who she met soon after moving to Detroit. She admitted that the cohabitation situation was not one that materialized at her insistence. In her words, she and her partner “slid” into this arrangement. She said that it is an arrangement that does not always sit well with her. They argued about him getting his own place and his own car. Right now, he uses hers during the day while she’s at work and he has three children living in a different state for which he is responsible. When I inquired about how they came to live together and their cohabitation arrangement, Grace shared the following explanation and consciously tied it back to her mother’s advice about marrying an affluent partner. She explained:
[He is] driving my car because he didn't have a car either. And so at that time, I was incredibly angry about it and also insecure because you know. The girlfriends that I was hanging around at the time thought he was using me, or accused him of using me. And you know were putting him down, because he didn't have his own situation. And I internalized that and then started to resent him for it. And so for many, many months, we would argue about him in his own place, or him getting his own car...When he didn’t have the guts, or I don’t really know what it was that tell me that he just couldn't afford to make it all happen. Plus he was taking care of three kids you know. And so that’s just what I was saying. Still, even to this day because he’s still living with me, still not having his own place or his own car, but now it's kind of like we are living together. So, but, there was never like a conversation around living here. There was never a decision. It was almost kind of like I was forced, like kind of forced to take care of him. But you know, I think that’s also a misnomer, because he is contributing financially in some ways with bills. He’s also, you know, contributing supremely emotionally to me as well spiritually. You know and our growth together. So it just kind of forced me to look at love and relationships differently outside of materialistic definitions I was used to particularly, especially from my mother.

Grace, who is extremely successful having graduated from an elite business school, actually exchanged her financial stability and security for a partner who is emotionally and spiritually supportive. She goes against her mother’s advice to partner with a man who can provide her with a certain lifestyle, and instead partners with a man who she financially supports. Still, there are remnants of her parents’ interactional patterns in her own behavior. During a heated argument, she actually articulates throwing her partner’s belongings out of the home they share in much the same way that her mother threw her father’s things out of their family’s home when she was growing up.
Gail and Grace sought to avoid repeating their parents’ relational patterns. By doing so, they believed that they would have different romantic and relational experiences than their parents. Despite their cognitive awareness, they still encountered some challenges, and in Gail and Grace’s cases even repeated some of the very patterns in behavior she worked so hard to avoid.

3.9.3 Lessons Learned from a Challenging Parental Relationship

One respondent who observed relational challenges in her parents had more relational success in chartering a different course is Rachel. Rachel embodies the Black superwoman stereotype. She was born and raised in Chicago, and currently resides in a nearby suburb with her husband and two young children. By day, she works at an advertising agency, and by night, she focuses her energy on growing an already successful start-up. Primarily, Rachel’s mother raised her after her parent’s divorce. When she was young, she remembers that her mother had an affair, and that led to a great deal of tension in her parent’s marital relationship. She says that she felt like her mother and the younger women in her family did not set good romantic relationship examples for her. Specifically, when I asked her about the lessons she learned from her parent’s relationship, Rachel flatly said, “Everything not to do. And I say that kind of heartbroken. I watched my friends and their families and their relationships…two parents at home who love each other….”. She goes on to say that her relationship with
her mother remains strained to this day and she fears that very little will change that
dynamic in the future.

In her own romantic relationship, Rachel has consciously tried to create a new
family form, one that involves her husband, her children, and their extended families.
She is intentional about creating a loving, healthy environment for her children and a
romantic relationship that is characterized by trust and mutual respect between her and
her husband. She said:

I take me for what I am. If my face is telling you I’m disgusted, then chances are
something ain’t right. But at home, to preserve our relationship, I try and be as
controlled as possible but he already knows. He knows. He’ll come over and like
unscrunch my eyebrows physically. Because I’m all frowned up at him. I don’t
like arguing because I think it’s counterproductive. I don’t like our kids seeing us
argue. I don’t mind our kids seeing us discuss things and have a back and forth
but I don’t like raising my voice or getting angry or like upset.

Together, these findings demonstrate that respondents understand parental
messaging and modeling, specifically verbal messaging and parents’ interactional
behaviors to influence the beliefs, attitudes, and in some cases the behaviors and actions
that middle class Black women enact in their own romantic interactions and
relationships. While other factors may influence the beliefs and attitudes that women
develop about romantic interactions, it is clear that some of these beliefs are located in
the messages that parent’s transmit directly to their daughters either explicitly through
their guidance, advice, or silence about romantic relationships, sex, dating, and
marriage, and the ways that parents interacted, communicated, expressed love, and
problem solved influences the way that respondents think about and engage in their own romantic relationships in adulthood.

3.10 Discussion

This study used in-depth interviews with middle class Black women from eight metropolitan areas in the United States to investigate the relationship between socialization experiences in childhood and adolescence and the specific messages transmitted from parents to their daughters about love, romance, dating, and marriage.

One of the principal aims of qualitative research is to be attentive to individuals’ interpretations of what they believe is meaningful to and impactful in their lives. At the start of this study, I expected that incorporating questions about respondents’ families of origin and their parents’ romantic relationship(s) would give respondents a point of conversation that would be easy to talk about and help us build rapport quickly. Unexpectedly, fairly early on in the interview process, I became aware of the ways that respondents felt very strongly about the kinds of guidance, advice, messaging, and in many cases lack of advice, their parents gave them during childhood and adolescence.

These data suggested that Black women between the ages of 30 and 40 years old are most likely to receive messages that deemphasize romantic relationships in adolescence either through parental silence or parents focusing on their daughters academic and professional potential. The data is descriptive in nature, so it is not
possible to determine conclusively whether these messages cause Black women to employ particular behaviors in romantic situations or engage in relationships in ways that align perfectly with their parent’s expectations. It is possible, however, to consider that some upwardly mobile and middle class Black parents do not intentionally cultivate or nurture their daughter’s relational and emotional development. So while middle class Black parents may consciously attempt to develop their daughter’s intellectual gifts and talents and ultimately succeed in developing adults who know how to challenge authority, manage their time, and navigate bureaucratic institutions (Lareau 2002), middle class parents who have more financial and social resources seem to only impart knowledge or skills that they believe will improve their daughters future social and job opportunities and potentially protect them from an unplanned pregnancy or heartbreak. At the same time, upwardly mobile parents who typically have fewer financial and time resources for childrearing similarly avoid any substantive conversations about love and dating with their daughters and instead focus their advice on messages that are similar to that of middle-class Black parents. Thus, this is an example of an instance in which middle-class and upwardly mobile Black parents actually employ identical messaging strategies in their communications with their daughters.

The interview data focused on questions about parents’ interaction during childhood and adolescence, the characterization of their intimate relationship and the lessons respondents learned from observing their parents relationship, and the kinds of
advice and guidance respondents received from their parents about romantic interactions. It became clear after the first three or four interviews that parents were not attentive to their daughter’s emotional and relational developmental needs and several parents sought to give their daughter’s advice that was protective, principled, practical, and progressive.

This general focus can be explained in two ways. As the extant literature suggests, it is clear that Black working class and middle class parents encourage their daughters to maintain or improve their socioeconomic position. Among upwardly mobile and middle class Black Americans, an important aspect of the normative life course process is the notion that you are an example to your race. Blacks are empowered or burdened in some ways with the belief and expectation that they have to be a success story and they have to uplift their families through their education, hard work, and success. In some ways, Black Americans are encouraged to do everything that they can to secure and protect this social mobility or achieved status. In fact, firmly middle class Black daughters might have or experience a different kind of social pressure than those who grew up with a lower income or upwardly mobile Black parents.

For some Black mothers, encouraging their daughters to be independent, self-reliant, and financially secure is in step with the lessons their own mothers and grandmothers taught them. According to the concept of collective memory, Black grandmothers and mothers communicate or pass down beliefs and values associated
with the need to be financially independent, the inability to rely on men to provide for their families, and a sense of responsibility for their households to their Black daughters. In turn, these messages influence Black women’s expectations of themselves in terms of their educational and professional lives, and to some extent, the roles that they can expect to assume in the context of a family. These messages, however, do not facilitate trusting, mutually dependent attitudes in romantic relationships. As such, women often articulate “keeping an eye on things”, taking responsibility for being the money managers of their households, and otherwise guiding and directing their romantic relationships in ways that are traditionally masculine roles.

Perhaps it is the case that working class and middle class parents were aware of the challenges, anecdotally or experientially, that would face their daughters in terms of their professional pathways. The triple oppression (race, class, and gender) that black women encounter is enough reason to encourage their Black daughters to concentrate on schooling and education. In addition to fears about multiple forms of oppression, concerns over out of wedlock pregnancies or partnering with a man or woman who could potentially divert their daughter’s attention from their educational or professional path, it is not all surprising that some Black parents encourage their daughters to “study their books”.

Directing their daughters to focus on their professional lives, Black working and middle class parents were also protecting them from potentially falling into economic
precariousness or losing ground on the middle class standing that they worked so hard
to secure for them. Haynes (2000) echoes particular sentiments about gender
socialization and expectations of Black daughters in study of middle class Black men
and women’s expectations of marital life. She finds that Black men and women believe it
is important to raise their daughters to be “nurturing”, “womanly, feminine”, at the
same time, however, respondents articulate a clear need to raise their daughters in
gendered ways. One respondent reported, “...I think you have to prepare your daughter
to, you know, not [to] cut off her opportunities at an early time by becoming pregnant.”

Alternatively, it is also possible that mothers and fathers unconsciously
communicate cautious, negative messages, or messages that deemphasize romantic
connections altogether, to their daughters to protect them from relational or romantic
disappointment that may come along with dating and pursuing romance. In light of
their own relationship mistakes and missteps, parents may believe that their role is to
cautions their daughters against potential relational pitfalls. More research is needed in
this area to understand the specific mechanisms involved in the transmission process
between Black parents and their children.

On the basis of this study’s findings, I contend that this study makes several key
contributions to the literature. A major contribution this study makes to family
scholarship and studies on the transmission of beliefs generally is the typology of
parental messaging communicated to Black daughters. The four types of messaging –
practical, progression, principled, and protective – illustrate an important aspect of racial and gendered socialization in childhood and adolescence for Black daughters. To this point, scholars have investigated the messages that Black parents communicate to their daughters around issues related to racial and gendered socialization including racial identity, instilling a sense of pride in one’s race, and how Black daughters are uniquely racially socialized to be strong, independent, and self-reliant. Scholars have not systematically examined the kinds of messages Black parents communicate to their daughters about romance, love, and romantic partnering, or the ways that these messages are transmitted from parents to their daughters. Rather than focusing on structural and behavior factors that influence marital outcomes for Black women, scholars would do well to consider the contribution of Black women’s families of origins to their beliefs about sex and sexuality, dating, marriage, and other forms of intimate unions.

Second, in addition to the four types of messaging that are identified and developed in this study, it is important to systematically examine Black middle-class and upwardly mobile parents silence on certain topics related to sex, intimacy, emotions, and developing healthy relationships. Quite frankly, many Black parents in this study actually evade direct questions from their daughters and fail to provide them with explicit messages that support healthy relationships. This silence and avoidance is complicated by the fact that some parents had challenging relationships of their own. To
that end, many respondents in this study lacked a healthy blueprint that informed their understanding of how a romantic relationship should look and feel. Moreover, some of the messages that parents communicated actually encourage their daughters to prepare for the eventuality of singleness or divorce. The lack of messaging, advice, guidance, or wisdom around understanding their own emotions and amorous feelings for members of the same or opposite sex, how to maintain a healthy relationship, and ways to identify a loving, trustworthy partner are consequential not just for how Black daughters approach romantic relationships, but also to some extent to the priority that they give them in their lives. I acknowledge that the findings from this study are not based on data from a probability sample of Black women in the United States. As such, there may be some question about the generalizability of the results from this study. Nevertheless, by identifying and describing the four types of parental messaging, alongside the kinds of observational learning that Black daughters are exposed to in their families of origin, I provide family scholars with a new conceptual knowledge and some guiding research questions that are useful to studies involving Black middle-class women and other populations as well.

These four types of messaging raise other important conceptual and methodological issues to consider. The lack of explicit messaging and guidance related to dating and relationships by Black parents is particularly important as research finds that 75 percent of Black women in the United States will marry by the time they are 35
years old (Toldson & Marks 2015). As such, it is not enough for Black parents to communicate messages to their daughters, or possibly their sons for that matter, that educational attainment, career paths, and social class or status is primary, or even the most important aspect of one’s transition from adolescence to adulthood. By doing so, they are ignoring a fundamental dimension of their children’s emotional and psychological development.

Equipping Black children with messages about racial pride, self-sufficiency, and upward mobility during childhood and adolescence are an essential part of the Black experience, but some attention should be given to matters of the heart. Moreover, the ways that Black parents may be arming their daughters with protective potentially fearful and anxiety laden messages related to romantic love and partnership is problematic. In fact, some of these messages may be teaching Black daughters skills and strategies that make it difficult to establish loving, trusting romantic relationships, and to a lesser extent, help them to protect themselves in the event that they do marry. Concurrently, Black parents may also be limiting their daughters exposure to and development of emotional competencies and strengths commonly associated with healthy romantic relationships such as vulnerability, agreeableness, openness, problem solving, nurturing fondness and admiration, and emotional intelligence (Gottman & Silver, 1999; Donnellan, Conger, & Bryant 2004). These emotional skills are consequential not just in terms of how daughters can use them to engage in romantic
relationships, but also for knowing how and when to disengage from negative or unfruitful romantic involvements.

3.11 Future Research

Future research should take an intergenerational approach to understand the influences of the transmission of knowledge and beliefs between Black parents and grandparents to their children and grandchildren. Specifically, parents should be asked the following kinds of questions. What were their priorities in raising your children, and specifically, your daughter? Did they consider the implications for their parenting style on their emotional or relational decision-making? How did they feel about their daughters pursuing romantic love, relationships, sex, etc.? What expectations did they have of their daughters academically and/or professionally? What hopes did they have for their daughter in terms of her relationship trajectory? Do they believe their own beliefs or actions influenced their daughters approach to romantic partnering?

In addition, future studies should consider the romantic implications of Black daughter’s being encouraged to be strong, independent, or self-reliant. What are the relational consequences? In what ways has this kind of advice benefitted respondents? How has it hindered respondent’s ability to form romantic, intimate connections? Moreover, additional research is needed to understand how the racial and gender
socialization of Black daughters is associated with their emotional and intimate lives in adulthood.

A recent report published by Making Caring Common an affiliate of The Harvard Graduate School of Education finds that 70 percent of young adults ages 18-25 wished that they received more information on the emotional part of romantic relationships from their parents, and 65 percent of respondents stated that they wanted some guidance on the emotional aspect of relationships from a course in school.

Consistent with these findings, the ability to establish a trusting relationship with a partner is an important developmental goal for the majority of the respondents in this study, yet, several women report feeling a lack of guidance or difficulty navigating the romantic landscape without a blueprint or framework to guide them. Seven respondents specifically say that they wish that their parents had given them more guidance on the topic of dating, romance, intimacy, and relationships. Beyond the interactional processes in the context of the Black family and the messages that respondents receive directly from their parent or parents during adolescence, it is important that all families, including upwardly mobile and middle class Black ones, begin to take seriously the need to develop emotional competencies and frameworks through which daughters and sons can understand their own emotions and relational needs and learn how to engage in romantic relationships in healthy and productive ways. Scholars have consistently found that relational happiness more central to overall well being than career
satisfaction or money (Vaillant 2015). If this true, among Black families, it is important to re-center the paradigm about what it means to be a success and an example, in ways, to your race beyond achieving or maintaining middle- or upper-middle class standing and expand this definition to include successful romantic and familial relationships.

It is important to note that all of these interviews were conducted in large, metropolitan cities. While geography is not analyzed in this study, it could potentially enhance or restrict middle class Black women’s access to potential partners. Future studies should consider the gender, racial, and socioeconomic composition of particular metropolitan areas in analyses of Black women’s romantic partnering experiences and opportunities.
Chapter 4. Emotions, Nonlinearity, and Uncertainty: Emergent Relational Strategies in Disadvantaged Marriage Markets

In Chapter 3, I established that the advice and guidance that middle-class Black women received about relationships from their parents may have left them with some questions about how to approach their own romantic pursuits. Some years after they have left their families of origin, women are still looking for guidance and answers on how to build healthy, stable romantic interactions and partnerships. For more than 80 percent of respondents in this study, the imprint of their families of origin was still present in their attitudes and beliefs about such interactions. For example, respondents consistently shared lessons learned from their families of origin, desire to marry, and in most cases have their own children. Despite their aspirations for marriage and family, many respondents experienced the path to a committed, healthy, stable relationship to be a winding road characterized by uncertainty. Most felt unprepared for the journey.

Noticeably absent from the messages respondents report receiving from their parents was any serious attention to or discussion of emotions. While it is ideal for parents to communicate healthy, prosocial messages about emotions, it is possible that parents can also communicate negative, distressing messages about emotions to their children. Nonetheless, emotions were largely missing from respondents’ discussions of their parents’ romantic relationships, and in the advice or guidance parents
communicated to their daughters as they matured and developed an interest in dating, relationships, and marriage. In upwardly mobile and middle-class Black families there was little-to-no emphasis on exploring, identifying, or understanding one’s sexual or amorous emotions. In fact, most daughters’ emotions and feelings, especially as they relate to romantic partnering or intimate relationships, were wholly unacknowledged or unexplored as a part of their adolescent development, or redirected to concerns related to social mobility and social status. Emotions, which are both motivating factors involved in the establishment, maintenance, and dissolution of romantic interactions, and an outcome or consequence of romantic involvement will be important as I lay the foundation for this study.

In this chapter I address the second research question what role do emotions play in women’s romantic relationships? I begin with a case study profile of Diana to illustrate two themes that emerged in my analyses. I draw particular attention to Diana’s participation in several extended non-commitments, a nonlinear relationship type that I elaborate on later in the study, as a strategy for dealing with her aspirations for a committed relationship and concurrent inability to secure a formal commitment from the partners with whom she engages. She showed me what relationships are really like for some middle-class Black women.

First, some Black middle-class women are involved in romantic commitments and situations that do not progress stably and sequentially in a linear fashion from one
stage of romantic partnering to the next. Rather, Diana, like many study respondents report engaging in intimate and romantic interactions that involve starts and stops, extended non-commitments, reengagement with past romantic partners, frequent emotional highs and lows, and in some cases infidelity and extramarital partners.

Second, respondents report a number of feelings and emotional experiences associated with these nonlinear romantic attachments. Some of these feelings actually motivate their decision to engage, re-engage, or maintain a relationship with a partner, while others contribute to their uncertainty about themselves and their participation in the relationship, their romantic partners, or the relationship itself. Most importantly for this study, some respondents actually draw a clear connection between their involvement in these tenuous commitments and pseudo-relationships and their knowledge of and anxiety over the marriage market. Specifically, several respondents actually express a general uncertainty or anxiety associated with the dating or marriage “pool” or “market” for Black women.

4.1 Diana: Almost Doesn’t Count

Diana is a forty-year-old newly married, first-time mother-to-be. In my interview with her, she reflected on her observations of her own and other women’s persistence and resilience in the context of romantic relationships. In particular, she characterized
the emotional process associated with romantic disappointments or failures as a form of
grief that requires patience, time, and healing to pull through. She said, for example:

... Like women, we get our feelings hurt and we always have to recover. We always have to be strong. I mean, you have your moments of weakness, you give yourself your time to grieve, but we recover. Eventually, we are willing to put ourselves back out there, and maybe I can’t speak, forgive me, I shouldn’t say we, I can’t speak for everybody but for a handful of my friends, who I know have gone through heartache, we are still willing to put ourselves out there even if we have a bandage or Band-Aids here and there, you know, patching up that wound. We don’t hold onto it so badly that we can’t ever recover ...

Later, in what became a two-and-a-half-hour long interview, Diana articulated her experiences with several failed romantic interactions that never culminated in established relationships, and her efforts to adjust her emotional state and ways of being in order to attract or secure a relationship. Based on her description of several interactions it became very clear that a number of her romantic partners were content to spend time, have sex, and romantically engage Diana, but were unwilling to formalize these relationships:

I wasn’t very emotionally available for a few years, but then I thought I should put myself back out there and try ... I kind of explored and tested to see how I felt. I was afraid of being too vulnerable... I tried being cool, like, Yeah, let’s not define things. These situations may last six months, nine months. And then I’d be like, Okay, let’s rework this. Let’s try a different angle. Like, let me show you how down I am for you and how flexible I am, that I’m not so thirsty that I’m just gonna put all my stuff out there, and I tried a whole bunch of approaches to dating to try to figure out what’s the winning combo ... and I learned that there are guys who want to come around you. They want to be involved, they want to have the benefits of being intimate with you, they wanna hang out, they want to come visit you, or whatever, but then they don’t ever really want to move beyond that phase ... After the last guy that really hurt me, it finally got to a
point where I was like, Look, I'm just going to be upfront and say this is what I'm about. This is where I am in my life. And then you tell me you are about ... It created something where they had to say something, that I would choose if I am emotionally invested to this relationship or whatever, wherever it is going. That was probably around thirty-five and thirty-six that I said, You know what? Bump this, I'm trying to play this all of these different ways, maybe, and everybody's not trying to hear that, but it was like preserving my emotional state with regard to relationships and trying to keep myself on track for what I wanted emotionally. To get to that vulnerable place, I had to get clear, honest with myself about what I wanted, not that I wasn't honest before. But I was trying to not be too harsh or too blunt or too forward, too direct, and to show that I could hang, but ultimately, this is what I'm about before getting too caught up or becoming intimate with a person. I'd rather not go there.

Diana’s description of her awareness of her thoughts and actions in several romantic interactions piqued my curiosity about two things: 1) how and why Black middle class women decide to engage or disengage in these uncertain, tenuous romantic relationships; and 2) the emotions that motivate these decisions, how they manage their emotions in the context of these interactions, and the feelings that emerge as a result from these kinds of uncommitted or unpredictable romantic arrangements.

At the conclusion of our interview, Diana revealed an especially challenging time in her life. She recalled a point in her mid-thirties when she found herself in a “really dark place” and describes herself as suicidal. She revealed that her family became very concerned about her wellbeing. Her parents, who have had an enduring, loving more than 45-year-long marriage, one that Diana aspires to emulate, were deeply concerned about her safety. Quietly and soberly, she says, “I had an intervention.” She remembers that her low emotional state and contemplation of suicide were not associated with her
romantic experiences with one specific person. Rather, it was the cumulative effect of facing a lot of what she called romantic rejection, fear, and anxiety, alongside the pressures associated with maintaining her career. Throughout her retelling of the challenges she experienced, I became attentive to the approaches Diana used to secure a committed relationship, the repeated non-commitments she experienced in her romantic relationships, and the emotional toll that Diana’s pursuit of the marriage and family had on her.

Diana’s interview shed light on several important points: 1) how nonlinear romantic relationships develop and are maintained among middle-class Black women, 2) what kinds of emotions are involved in romantic relationships for Black middle class women, and 3) how nonlinear romantic involvements are associated with middle-class Black women’s emotional experiences. Diana perceived one of the challenges she faced in romantic partnering as related, in part, to her social location. She explicitly stated that several men she dated were both impressed by her level of education and accomplishments, and also intimidated or turned off by the resources and wealth that she “brought to the table.” She also described adopting different styles and approaches in order to make herself a more desirable romantic partner to the men with whom she engaged. Unfortunately, these different approaches did not result in the kind of stable romantic relationship development Diana aspired to. Moreover, her reflection on her own emotional frustrations, disappointments, and negotiations brought her to tears
during our interview. That single emotional expression, in light of all of the
labyrinthine-like relationships that Diana and other respondents shared with me, led me
to reflect on the ways that unstable relational development, disadvantages in the
marriage market, and emotions intersect for Black middle-class women and how
uncertainty is related to respondent’s relational experiences.

Earlier in this project, I articulated my interest in uncovering how relationships
unfold for middle-class Black women. Despite an increase in attention to the family and
reproductive lives of these women, scholars pay only scant attention to how and what
kinds of romantic relationships develop among Black women. Some of these studies
focus on low-income and poor Black women and examine arrangements such as
rostering (Burton 2014), multiple partner fertility and other mothering (Burton &
Hardaway 2012), cohabitation (Golub 2015), and marital delays (Gibson-Davis, Edin, &
McLanahan 2005). Two studies of college-aged Black women found that the gender ratio
imbalance on campus, of more Black women to Black men, was a key element of the
campus dating environment (Johnson 2017; Ferguson, Quinn, Eng, & Sandelowski,
2006). While this research focused on how young Black women were placed at an
increased risk for HIV infection, scholars found that as a result of the imbalance of men
to women on campus, Black male sexual partners had multiple female sexual partners.
Based on the limited availability of romantic partners on campus, young Black women
had to determine whether to “accept” this arrangement involving men on or off campus,
or find alternatives to dating on campus. While these studies shed light on the kinds of arrangements low-income and poor Black women engage in and college aged Black women, no study systematically examines the types of romantic arrangements Black middle-class women between the ages of 30 and 40 engage in.

Scholars who study romantic partnering and marriage are interested in understanding how men and women think about, feel, and engage with their partners, and the processes involved in the development of these romantic unions. Related to the lack of scholarly investigation into the romantic involvements and arrangements of Black women, little attention has been paid to Black women’s emotional lives and experiences in intimate and romantic relationships. In light of the relatively high proportion of unmarried Black women, and the desire for marriage remaining high among this population, an important question that has not yet been answered in social science literature is the following: if Black middle-class women are unable to secure marriage from their romantic partners, what kinds of intimate involvements or arrangements are they engaging in or settling for? The primary focus of this study is to examine the relational strategies middle-class Black women adopt in a marriage market in which they are disadvantaged in terms of race, gender, and power (Collins 2002; 2004; 2005). For the purposes of this study, relational strategies refers to the kinds of relationship forms romantic involvements take for Black middle class women.
Specifically related to my interest in understanding the relationship between relational strategies and emotions, Bryant and Conger (2002) find that the inability to establish secure, stable romantic relationships predicts both emotional and physical distress. In addition to distress and other emotions, I find that these nonlinear romantic interactions, the overwhelming majority of which result in dissolution, are characterized by significant uncertainty. Moreover, respondents frequently allude to challenges in gaining, establishing, and maintaining power in their romantic relationships.

Consistent with other research on romantic relationships, women experience a range of emotions related to the development, maintenance, and permanence or dissolution of intimate partnerships and situations, such as hope, optimism, excitement, resilience, fear, pain, hurt, grief, and depression (Simon & Barrett; 2010; Erickson 2005; Cartensen, Gottman, & Levenson 1995). No study, however, examines the role of emotions in motivating Black middle-class women’s decision to enter, re-enter, maintain, or dissolve a romantic relationship. This study fills an important gap in the literature in romantic partnering among Black middle-class women in that it examines three key aspects of romantic partnering among this population: 1) the romantic strategies or forms Black women accept, in part, as a consequence of their disadvantaged positionality in the marriage market; 2) the thoughts, feelings, and actions Black women experience in these interactions based, in part, on the uncertainty associated with romantic partnering for Black women; and 3) the role of emotions both as an motivator
for the decisions Black women make in their romantic interactions and as an outcome or consequence of their romantic involvement.

I use a modified grounded-theory approach (see Glaser 1978; LaRossa 2005) to analyze primary interview data from 52 middle-class Black women between the ages of 30 and 40, in order to examine the particular non-linear romantic occurrences and the corresponding emotional experiences of middle-class women. In these analyses, I am attentive to women’s motivations for engaging in particular romantic situations and their accounts of their decision to return to, remain in, or dissolve particular romantic situations.

I integrate several theoretical perspectives in this work. I consider symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1986), intersectionality theory (Cho et. al, 2013; Crenshaw 1993), and life course perspectives (Elder 1979, 1998) to investigate the ways that Black middle-class women see themselves, evaluate romantic partners, and cognitively and emotionally engage, reengage, and decide to exit or maintain romantic relationships. As previously stated, I examine the accounts, justifications, and explanations women give for their involvement and engagement in non-linear romantic relationships. Using symbolic interaction theory as a guide, I am interested in understanding how women make sense of the difference between their aspirations for a secure, stable romantic relationship and their involvement in nonlinear, unpredictable ones. I use intersectionality theory in this study as a lens through which to understand how Black
women recognize their position in the racialized, gendered dating and marriage market and to uncover how race, class, gender, and power complicate the process of accomplished, well-educated Black women achieving particular romantic and relational aspirations. In addition to symbolic interactionism and intersectionality theories, some key principles in life course perspectives include: linked lives; long-term trajectories; sequences of transitions; critical and sensitive periods; human agency (i.e. actively constructing meaning and making choices); and biographies and histories (i.e. living in a gendered, racialized, classed social system). For the present study, I am particularly interested in two aspects of life course perspectives literature: 1) trajectories; and 2) sequences of transitions, and how these two features of the life course perspective relate to Black women’s romantic and intimate relationships. There are a number of ways to examine the associations between romantic relationships, movement and transitions into and out of intimate unions, and the emotions that women experience as a part of this process. In this study, I focus on nonlinear romantic relationships, the emotions that women experience in these arrangements, and how nonlinearity and emotions are connected. Each of these outcomes are situated against the backdrop of uncertainty.

In the following sections, I provide a brief discussion of the stages of romantic partnering as commonly articulated and widely accepted in sociological literature. I also give an overview of the relevant literature on the normative development of romantic relationships, an overview of the relevant literature on the sociology of emotions,
including brief discussions of emotions as racialized, gendered, classed, and intersectional experiences, and uncertainty as the context in which romantic relationships are initiated, maintained, evaluated, dissolved, or made permanent.

4.2 Background

4.2.1 Romantic Relationship Development and Emotions

There are several models of relational development. While some focus on the linear, forward-moving progression of romantic relationships culminating in marriage, others incorporate elements of the decline, reevaluation, or termination of romantic relationships. According to Honeycutt and Cantrill (2000), several scholars have critiqued these kinds of stage-based models, because it is difficult to identify the stages, direction of movement, and the rate of movement in romantic relationships, because these features depend on the people involved in these relationships. The life course perspective examines how individuals’ transitions and trajectories are connected across the age span (birth to 65+) and across developmental stages including infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age. This perspective has been applied to topics such as how previous marital and parenting experiences influence individuals’ entrance into post-marital relationships (Lichter & Qian 2008); non-marital romantic relationships and gender differences in mental health in early adulthood (Simon & Barrett 2010); and racial differences in completed fertility among college-educated women (Clarke 2011).
Black middle-class women’s ability to transition stably and predictably from one stage of romantic development to the next is influenced by structural and behavioral factors related to Black men and Black women and life course trajectories and transitions related to educational attainment and career. Black women’s inability to secure the kinds of romantic unions they aspire to (e.g. marriage) have emotional, psychological, and economic consequences. Tucker (2003) explained that factors including “declining sex ratios; deteriorating economic fortunes of African American men; increasing conflicts between the sex role orientations of Black men and women; and larger changing societal mores” influence changes in Black women’s romantic relationship and family formation attitudes and behaviors. Tucker (2003) found that Black women in group therapy express “a general pessimism about relationships, with the expectation that one will be disappointed or abused by men; the pressures and competing demands faced by black couples that serve to compromise relationships; the perceived shortage of Black men and its impact on the family and childbearing goals of women; and the effect on current relationships of unresolved issues from previous partnerships.” Essentially, social forces that are entirely outside of their control structure Black women’s intimate opportunities and sense of hope and possibility about romantic and relational possibilities.
4.2.2 Classical and Contemporary Theories on Emotions

Classical sociological theorists including Durkheim (1951), Simmel (1903), Parsons (1951), and Weber (1905; 2009) examined the connections between social behavior and feelings. Contemporary theorists, such as Hochschild (1983) and Goffman (1949), view emotions as, in large part, socially derived and constructed. From its inception, the sociology of emotions, a relatively new subfield, has been concerned with “how feelings are managed and the relationships between these processes, gendered structures, and cultural norms” (Erikson & Cottingham in Wilkins & Pace 2014). Specifically, scholars have proven that social and cultural processes influence emotions (Hochschild, 1979; Lutz 1988). Societies define “when an emotion is to be felt, what one should feel, and how one should act when feeling that emotion” (Larson, Clore, & Wood 1999), and scholars suggest that emotions are culturally constructed scripts (Hochschild, 1979; Lutz 1988; Shweder, 1994).

Hochschild (1979:561) introduced the theory of emotion management, and she defines it as “the act of trying to change in degree or quality an emotion or feeling.” Specifically, her theory “linked people’s structural locations to their associated feeling and expression rules” (Wilkins & Pace 2014). While Hochschild’s theory was developed to explain emotion management in workplace organizations, the theory has also been applied to studies of romantic unions (Aune, Buller, & Aune 1996; Giordano & Longmore 2006; Kim, Pears, & Capaldi 2009). Emotion management or emotional work
refers to the process a person undertakes to align their emotions with the feeling rules. Feeling rules provide the standards by which an individual judges their own emotions and the emotions of others. Whereas emotional management refers to how individuals consciously feel, how they try feel, and how they are aware of their feelings, the feeling rules, and the relevant social structures (Hochschild 1979).

Taking a step back from theoretical explanations of the development and responses to particular emotions, I want to emphasize the value that emotions hold to individuals’ lives, sense of self, and relationships. Harris (2015) stated:

Clearly, emotions are not trivial. They are a pervasive and fundamental part of our daily lives. They give color and meaning to virtually all our experiences – from the most mundane to the most extraordinary situations. Although they are often portrayed as less interesting or important than thinking and acting, emotions are intricately connected to our daily thoughts and behaviors. They sustain or threaten our most valued relationships and identities.

As McCarthy (1989) explained, emotions are not simply private feelings or possessions. For sociologists, the social dimensions of emotions are essential, since societal factors inform how we think about, label, and discuss our emotions. Moreover, the ways that we experience and manage emotions are consequential to our sense of self, assessment of a romantic partner, and evaluation of a romantic relationship. Scholars found that emotions including passion, excitement, jealousy, and even feeling “in love” are unique to particular societies and not universal in all (Larson, Clore, & Wood (1999) Furman, Brown, and Feiring eds.). Modern Americans are expected to feel or experience
certain emotions in the context of romantic interactions. In the United States, researchers find that both women and men desire to express their sexuality and to experience emotional closeness in romantic relationships (Oliver & Hyde 1993). Culturally, American photography, films, music, television, and other forms of media present particular images or representations of intimacy, love, romance, and partnership. These images shape how individuals in our society conceptualize and experience relational emotions. In some instances, men and women make relational comparisons between these images and representations of romantic love and intimacy and their actual, lived romantic experiences. In contrast to these broad conceptualizations, Black women experience unique racial and gendered emotions related to romantic relationships and intimate involvements. In the following sections, I provide a brief discussion on the relationships between race, class, gender, and intersectionality and emotions.

4.2.3 Emotions, Race, Class and Gender

Feeling rules vary across cultures. And race, class, and gender affect the ways in which people learn to experience and display emotions (Wilkins et al. 2016). Parents are the primary agents involved in the emotional socialization process – they teach children how to think about social situations and experiences; how to feel, communicate, and express emotions; and how to understand or interpret others’ emotions in interactions, starting with the family.
Wilkins and Pace (2014) investigated the ways in which emotions are tied to racial and class-based inequalities. Specifically, their research focuses on the ways in which race and class-based disparities influence the distribution of emotions, and they examine how social and cultural influences shape emotions. They write, “… Whiteness and middle classness tend to be treated as neutral, as if race is inconsequential to the experience of whiteness and class is inconsequential to the experience of being middle class.” Historically, scholarship has framed whites as middle class and Blacks as disadvantaged. In the present study, race, class, and gender intersect to create nuanced social identities—simultaneously privileged and disadvantaged—resulting in contradictory, complicated emotional realities and expressions. One such reality is psychological disorders such as depression and anxiety. Researchers have examined whether biological, social, or some combination of the two factors contribute to increased risk factor for developing these disorders.

In the introduction to the *Handbook of the Sociology of Emotions: Volume II*, Wilkins and Pace (2014) write that, “Emotions are central to inequalities.” Yet, existing scholarship on the subject of emotions has not systematically and critically considered the ways in which race, class, and gender are fundamental to the experience of emotions. The present study takes seriously Black women’s disadvantaged position in a gendered, racialized, and colorized dating hierarchy and considers the role of emotions as motivating decisions and as an outcome of romantic relationships.
Despite a lack of empirical inquiry in this area, inasmuch as scholarship focuses on race and emotions, it tends to address the experiences of African Americans. Scholars consistently find that racism alone is a chronic stressor (Wilkins and Pace 2014), and perceptions of racism increase feelings of anger, stress, and depression in Black Americans (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2007; Taylor and Turner 2002; Brown 2003). Based on the social causes of positive and negative emotions, one might assume that Blacks would report experiencing fewer positive emotions (happiness, joy, calm, peace) and more negative emotions (sadness, anger, anxiety, frustration) relative to whites. Despite their relatively low social status, however, scholars consistently find that Blacks report fewer negative emotions (Williams & Mohammed 2013), with some scholars associating these findings with Blacks having strong social support (Simon 2007).

Scholars found that other associations between race and emotions are also complicated. Simon (2007) argued that the relationship between chronic stress (which compromises Blacks’ physical health) and race is clear, but the relationship between stress and mental health for Blacks is less so. Blacks reported less anxiety and depressive symptoms than whites, but higher levels of distress and anger and hostility than non-blacks (Jackson et. al 2010; Taylor and Risman 2006). Easterlin (2001) reported that better-educated people describe experiencing more happiness than less-educated people, and whites report more happiness than Blacks. People from economically or class-disadvantaged backgrounds tend to have less supportive networks and fewer
coping mechanisms, and are thereby less able to protect themselves from the emotional challenges associated with difficult life circumstances (Wilkins & Pace 2014; McLeod and Kessler 1990 and Thoits 1989).

Studies of happiness have suggested that people who possess certain social advantages generally report having good feelings as compared to people with less social advantages. At the same time, race and class differences influence the ways in which emotions are experienced, and how some emotions are regarded as better or worse than others. For Blacks, the benefits of middle-class standing do not necessarily diminish the effects of social factors that trigger negative emotions. First, higher class status does not prevent Blacks from experiencing racist incidents (Lacy 2007; Patillo 2007). In fact, some scholars argue that, by virtue of their class standing, middle-class Blacks actually increase their exposure to social settings that engender racism and discrimination. Certain workplaces may increase Blacks’ exposure to certain kinds of stress and distress including social rejection and isolation (Jackson and Stewart 2003; Wilkins and Pace 2014). Moreover Anderson (2011) finds that having class identities disconfirmed by whites can actually promote negative emotions including anger and distrust in middle-class Blacks. Wingfield (2003) examines Black men who are employed in professional and managerial jobs. She finds that those in predominantly white workplaces experience racism, discrimination, stereotyping, and tokenism, and at the same time, they feel a sense of social distance from their working class Black counterparts.
In addition to the effects of race and class on emotions, gender adds another dimension to these processes. Simon (2007) wrote that, “… Class and race are not just variables affecting gendered processes, but may transform the experience and meaning of gendered emotions in ways that challenge presuppositions about the relationship between gender and emotions. Race and class thus remain both under-examined empirically, and under-theorized in emotions literature.” Middle-class Blacks experience social rejection, isolation, and tokenization as a consequence of workplace stress and distress (Anderson 2011). Moreover, the experiences of having their class identity disconfirmed can trigger feelings of resignation, anger, and distrust in middle class Blacks (Anderson 2011). Studies of middle-class Black Americans help to inform our understanding of the ways in which racism can create negative emotions irrespective of one’s class standing. These findings are confirmation that the benefits of middle-class status are not evenly conferred to Blacks and whites and these kinds of uneven outcomes could potentially emerge in contexts outside of the workplace, including romantic and intimate relationships.

On the other hand, a substantial amount of research finds that people with “less education, lower family income, and lower status occupations are more likely to experience mild to severe emotional distress” (Kessler and Clearly 1980; Simon 2009; Yu and Williams 1999; Wilkins and Pace 2014). In order to combat shame or a lack of self-esteem, working class and poor people make distinctions between themselves and
others. For example, Lamont (2002) finds that white working-class men distance themselves from others by emphasizing how others do not work as hard as they do; similarly, Black working-class men distinguish themselves from working-class white men by describing themselves as more caring and nurturing (Lamont 2002).

4.2.4 Emotions Among Middle-Class Girls and Women

Shifting away from the experiences of men and middle- and working-class men, I now draw attention to some of the existing research on the associations between gender, class, and emotions specifically for middle-class girls and women. Walkerdine, Lucy, & Melody (2001) examine the relationships between gender and class in Britain following significant social change involving deindustrialization and gendered shifts in the labor market, including gains in female employment and educational attainment, and rising male unemployment. They wrote:

That girls do well in school has recently been interpreted as a problem for boys, in particular working-class boys … The resounding success by girls that has been spoken of in recent years is primarily about middle-class girls and has set in train a debate about a crisis of masculinity in post-industrial or deindustrialized societies … Young women no longer rush to get married and settle down in their early twenties, forsaking a career for the role of wife and mother. (Walkerdine et. al 2001, 111-113).

Beyond their investigation into Britain’s changing educational and occupational landscape, and the ways in which middle-class and upwardly mobile women are involved in this labor market, the authors also provided some analyses of the ways in
which emotions are socialized in middle-class families. They found that young middle-class women in Britain feel intense inadequacy despite their intense hard work, and that the limits of the educational and labor markets actually dash the hopes of upwardly mobile young women.

Walkerdine et al. (2001) started their data collection when daughters are four years old, and they follow families for 20 years. They found that four-year-old middle-class daughters are taught to rationalize emotions and to engage in rational arguments with their mothers. The authors suggest that this kind of socialization is instructive and teaches daughters how to “believe in the power of their argument”. They argue:

… Girls are encouraged to be sensitive to other people’s and their own feelings. Strong emotional responses are discouraged, just as powerful emotions are converted into rational argument. Powerful emotions have to be expressed as nice or not nice feelings. In that way girls can be both feminine and avoid what is understood as the worst excesses of ‘animal passion.’ For many middle-class mothers there are nice and nasty feelings, sensible and silly behavior. These emotional strategies are produced through a variety of practices by which mothers regulate the emotional responses of their daughters. When daughters express violent emotions, and especially aggression towards their mothers, it is common for the mothers to respond with phrases such as, ‘That’s not very nice,’ when in fact the daughter said, ‘I’ll poke your eyes out’… We argue that that practices such as these have a profound effect on what it means to grow up middle class and female, when rational argument wins the day and powerful emotions are at best not very nice.

Again, for middle-class young women, emotional socialization involves a process through which daughters are trained to reason or rationalize their emotions, and essentially suppress what could be characterized as their “gut” reactions, and instead
seek to make their feelings make sense. Working-class or upwardly mobile parenting practices are very different. In working class families in this study, mothers were described as “explicit about power differentials and about their own position of authority.” Moreover, these parenting practices align with the social relations of working-class life, including the kinds of employment and working relations that exist among individuals in this class strata. Other scholars have examined the ways that social class influences emotional patterns and find that upwardly mobile daughters are socialized to suppress emotions. Pace (2014) found that working-class parents employ a parenting style that encourages children to be deferential to authority and to demonstrate external control.

Based on gender-emotion stereotypes, women are generally perceived to be more emotionally expressive than men (Fischer & Manstead 2000). A widely held belief among Americans is that women are also more emotional in general. In fact, there is a belief that certain emotions and expressions of emotions are distributed differently among men and women. Specifically, Simon and Nath (2004) wrote:

Women are believed to feel and express sadness more frequently than men, whereas men are believed to feel and express anger more frequently than women. Beliefs about men’s and women’s subjective feelings and expressive behavior are evident in everyday life as well as in popular culture – including self-help and advice books, literature, music, television, and film.

In this study, I paid attention to the ways that Black middle-class women communicated their feelings about specific romantic situations and how these situations
influenced how they think and feel about themselves, their partners, and the relationships they are or were involved in.

4.2.5 Black Women and Mental Health

As an additional caveat, it is critically important to consider the role of mental health in the experiences of middle-class Black women in romantic interactions and relationships. Sociologists specifically have explored the social realities that may predispose women to experience depression at higher rates than men. One paradigm focuses on the normative expectations of women that requires them to be attentive to other’s needs while forsaking their own “goals, desires, and feelings” (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2007). Scholars suggest that the self-silencing involved in taking on particular forms of femininity that are required to be evaluated as “good women” can take a toll on women. Much of the existing sociological and empirical work on depression has focused on middle-class white women (Brooks-Betram 1996; Cannon, Higginbotham, and Guy 1989, even as Schrieber (1996) found that women of color experience depression at rates comparable to or higher than white women. In her study of Black women and depression, Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2007) writes:

I argue that the construct of strength is rooted in a set of problematic assumptions: that strong Black women are the stark and deviant opposites of weak and appropriately feminine white women, that strength is a natural quality of Black women and a litmus test for their womanhood, and that being strong accurately characterizes Black women’s motivations and behaviors. To question strength as a social construct is to investigate whose interests it serves, to ask
what other qualities may co-exist with it, and to be open to commonalities among as well as differences between Black women and women from other ethnic groups. It is to explore the social processes that often depict Black women as liberated from traditional white norms of femininity while such women continue to experience poverty, violence, and illness at rates that exceed those of their so-called fragile white sisters.

Black women tend to “identify most strongly with the racial demands of the situation and be appropriately protective of the egos of Black men who face these problems” (Robinson-Brown and Keith 2003). They write, “Such behavior can cause women to suppress their own socio-emotional needs, which over time may compromise both relationships and individual well-being” (Robinson-Brown and Keith 2003).

Alongside inquiries into Black women’s strength, and to some extent their experiences with stress, distress, and depression, it is also important to expand the range and types of emotions ascribed to Black women generally, and in the context of intimate and romantic relationships. In the present study, I consider the ways that emotions such as fear, anxiety, and uncertainty actually motivate Black women to remain in unpredictable romantic unions.

4.2.6 Power in Relationships

Power, gender, class, and social status are all ways in which individuals rank themselves and others (Stets & Turner, 2014). Social status refers to the social positions that are ascribed by others based on their perception of one’s prominence or respect due from others (Anderson & Berdahl 2002), while power is the ability and competence to
influence others, dominate resources, and control rewards and punishments (Stets and Turner, 2014). Scholars who study gender have examined how status and power structure heterosexual romantic interactions and gender differences in emotions and expressions of emotions.

Kemper’s (1978) theory of emotions contradicts Hochshild’s theory and suggests that structural factors including an individual’s social status influence emotional responses to social situations. In Kemper’s view, power and status are the essential aspects of social relationships that elicit specific emotions during social interactions. This theory primarily focuses on situational interactions. According to Kemper (1978, 2006, 2011), a person involved in an interaction who holds more status or power experiences more positive emotions such as security, happiness, and control, whereas individuals with less power or status feel more negative emotions, including sadness and anger. Based on Kemper’s theory, it is possible to infer that women, and for the purposes of this study Black women, who tend to have less status and less power than men in the United States, should experience or report more negative emotions than men and less ability to exert power in their romantic relationships.

Women, in particular women of color, are disadvantaged in the romantic hierarchy. Scholars find that power is inherently conferred to men in romantic relationships as they have historically controlled material resources and were able to make decisions about the timing, pace, level of commitment, and other aspects of
romantic relationships (Blumstein & Schwartz 1983). Specifically for middle-class Black women, power plays out across three axes – race, class, and gender (Weber 1998; Collins 1993). In addition to these axes of inequality, Black women have historically had to deal with issues related to colorism (Okazawa-Rey, Robinson, and Ward 1987; Collins 1998) and stereotyping (Harris-Perry 2011; West 1995; Collins 1998) within the Black community and from outside it as well. Black women’s social location, along with the aforementioned structural and behavioral factors involved in romantic partnering, can make it challenging for this group of women to secure and maintain power in sexual and romantic relationships (Bowleg, Lucas, & Tschann 2004; Burton & Tucker 2009; Wallace 2007; Davis, Emerson, & Williams 1997). This inability to secure power can lead to women’s relational desires, expectations, and needs remaining unmet. This point is particularly important as I describe the kinds of romantic involvements Black middle-class women participate in and their motivations for doing so.

4.2.7 Black Middle-Class Women and Uncertainty: Economic and Relational

Uncertainty is often conceptualized as a poverty and inequality experience. Typically, explanations of uncertainty refer to social and economic insecurity or instability, stressful or unstable social relationships, or unpredictable connections. Chronic uncertainty refers to a “state of ambiguity in which immediate or future conditions or events are unpredictable or otherwise not clearly determinable by the
actors involved” (Burton 2014; Burton and Tucker 2009). Still, economic uncertainty exists among the middle class, as scholars find that many middle-class Americans are “economically fragile, barely able to maintain their lifestyle” (Sullivan, Warren, and Westbrook 2001). Income-to-debt ratios, lack of emergency savings, consumer bankruptcy filings, and higher-than-ever student loan debt are indicators that some middle-class Americans’ financial situations remain tenuous. Moreover, middle-class Blacks do not enjoy the same benefits of their class standing as middle-class whites (Patillo 2007; Lacy 2007). For example, scholars find that being Black and middle class can be an especially precarious situation, as middle-class Blacks’ children are more likely to slide into a lower socioeconomic stratum than middle-class white children (Mazumder 2014).

Burton and Tucker (2009, p. 135) state that, “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.” Their research finds that poor and low-income women are not able to strategize with similar levels of certainty. While many respondents in the present study do not face the same daily life stressors as low-income or economically disadvantaged individuals, such as unstable, unpredictable work; low-paying or insecure jobs; inconsistent income; or the inability to meet the financial demands of day-to-day life, for many respondents their romantic lives were—in the past, or presently—characterized by uncertainty and unpredictability.
With respect to economically and socially based decisions, such as investing in a retirement plan, purchasing a home, or pursuing graduate or professional studies, Black middle-class women tend to have more resources and security than poor or low-income women. However, middle-class Black women are not insulated from certain forms of economic and social uncertainty by virtue of their class standing (Harvey 1993). For example, several respondents express angst and stress over the amount of student loans they have to repay, with some having given up hope that they will ever be free of their educational debt, while others date, partner with, or marry men who have fewer educational and financial resources.

In addition to these forms of economic uncertainty, middle-class Black women also experience relational uncertainty. Relational uncertainty is defined as the degree of confidence people have in their perceptions of involvement in an interpersonal relationship (Knobloch & Solomon 1999). According to Knobloch and Solomon (2002, p. 238), “Relational uncertainty arises from three interrelated yet conceptually distinct sources within ongoing associations: the self, the partner, and the relationship itself”. Relationship uncertainty can involve any of the following: questions about norms of appropriate behavior; the mutuality of romantic feelings; the definition of the relationship; the future of the relationship; one’s desire for the relationship; the evaluation of the value of the relationship; and the partners’ goals for the future (Knobloch & Solomon 1999; 2002). This uncertainty can influence relational intimacy.
(Knobloch & Solomon 2002); perceptions of closeness, fairness, trust, companionship, and emotional involvement (Planalp & Honeycutt 1985; Sodentani & Gudykunst, 1987); and negative emotions including distress, sadness, jealousy, anger, and fear (Afifi & Reichert, 1996; Knobloch and Solomon, in press).

In addition to concerns over childbearing and family formation, certain structural factors such as Black men’s socioeconomic outcomes, including education and employment, multiple partner fertility, and perceived and actual barriers in a racialized dating market contribute to feelings of uneasiness in many of my respondents. As such, Black women’s awareness of the racialized marriage market and their positionality therein could potentially be related to anxiety or uncertainty about their prospects of marriage and motherhood. This study examines how relational uncertainty and insecurity about the marriage market generally influences the kinds of romantic relationships Black middle-class women engage in and the emotions that motivate and result from their involvement in these relationships.

In considering experiences with uncertainty among low-income women and Black middle-class women, I am in no way suggesting that the inabilities to secure, maintain, or predict material resources or social relationships are identical or even comparable between the two groups. I am, however, signaling that Black middle-class women’s experience of relational uncertainty in their intimate relationships, and at the same time, an additional layer or dimension of uncertainty associated with their social
location and the availability of desirable romantic partners uniquely influences women’s emotional states. Moreover, Black middle-class women also experience distinct forms of social and economic uncertainty that create anxiety, stress, and—as Diana’s experience suggests—depression, as well as other potential mental health problems. Burton (2014) argues that low-income mothers face multiple situations that impact their psychological, physical, sexual, and financial wellbeing, and that—in light of these conditions—poor, single mothers will pursue temporary romantic situations to “seek relief from the daily challenges of poverty in ways that do not require constant calculations to meet practical needs.” Burton also finds that these temporary relationships or arrangements can be used to “build self-esteem and a sense of self-worth” for women who face otherwise challenging romantic, relational, and social challenges. I find that women with considerably greater educational and professional accomplishments, more positive social relationships, and greater financial and material resources, also engage in romantic relationships that involve significant relational uncertainty and nonlinearity, including self, partner, and relationship uncertainty and—more precisely—extended non-commitments, infidelity, break ups and make ups, emotional highs and lows, overlaps in committed relationships, returns to former romantic partners, and in some relationships even revenge cheating.
4.3 Methods

4.3.1 Data Sources

Data sources for this study include 52 transcribed interviews, detailed memos, and notes taken just after the interviews. These interviews collected data on respondents’ experiences in each phase of the romantic relationship development process, including initiation, evaluation, maintenance, and permanence or dissolution of a recent romantic union (see: Appendix 1). The questions were designed to draw out respondents’ accounts of their thoughts, beliefs, and actions, including the appropriate timing for the progression of a romantic relationship, compromises they have made in intimate interactions, instances of infidelity, hard decisions they have made in romantic situations, and when and how they have decided to end a relationship.

During the course of the interview process, I became attentive to the nonlinearity and what I called the “messiness” of these romantic relationships. In the analysis, I identified patterns in 1) the kinds of nonlinear relationships that Black middle-class women engage in; 2) the emotions respondents articulate experiencing at the start of, during, and at the conclusion of these interactions; and 3) the contextual realities relevant to uncertainty that influence their thoughts, feelings, and decision-making about these relationships.
4.3.2 Data Coding and Analyses

For each interview, I used a modified grounded theory approach to code this data. First, my initial field notes, transcribed interviews, and demographic questionnaires were open coded with common codes and sensitizing concepts (Glaser 1978). Second, I identified common patterns in coding within and across cases using constant comparison (Huberman & Miles 1994). I identified patterns in 1) the nature and quality of romantic relationships and interactions respondents engaged in; 2) respondents’ descriptions of their beliefs, thoughts, and actions in the context of these relationships, including the consistency or discrepancy between their words and actions, which is a common analytical strategy used by symbolic interactionists; 3) expressions of emotions including feelings, cognitions, or reflections on the quality of romantic relationships; and 4) mentions of non-linearity in romantic relationships, such as the initiation of a new relationship, a “break up to make up,” exiting an uncommitted situation, or returning to a former romantic partner. More precisely, for each transcribed interview, I coded for the following stages or occurrences in the romantic relationship formation process: entry, exit, re-entry, break, breakup, return to a former lover or partner. For example, Joi, a thirty-two-year old doctoral candidate described a particularly complicated past relationship involving her now ex-boyfriend. During our conversation, I asked her how her relationship ended, and she replied, “…So I had like the actual finish, the finale, cuz you know how breakups are. Again. We had, we had a
few breakups but the very last one…”. In this instance, the relationship was coded as a mention of a repeated start and stop, because the respondent and her romantic partner started the relationship, formally ended it, reengaged in a formalized relationship, and ended the relationship again. I also coded for particular emotions: excitement, happiness, love, joy, sadness, distress, depression, heartbreak, a desire to end a particular relationship, feeling something was “off,” confusion, fear, and uncertainty. Isabella, a thirty-year-old news reporter shared an experience related to her now ex-boyfriend where he was unfaithful twice in their romantic relationship. After she learned about her partner’s second transgression, she said, “…There were some hard decisions where I had to decide, well is this something that I’m willing to forgive or accept? And what does that mean for me as a person?” At the time, Isabella was unsure of what she could or could not tolerate from a romantic partner. In this instance, I coded this emotion as uncertainty.

In the last phase of the analyses, selective coding, I used LaRossa’s (2005) conceptualization of identifying the main story that underlies my analyses. I present the storyline using exemplar cases from the in-depth interviews to illustrate patterns that emerged from the data. The use of exemplars follows well-established practices for presenting empirical findings to give readers a sense of how actors construct meaning and perceive and experience particular events and processes.
4.4 Findings

4.4.1 Romantic Relationships Forms Among Middle-Class Black Women

To explore respondents’ romantic relationship behaviors, patterns, and forms, I first identified the types and nature of women’s relationship histories in the transcribed interviews. I reviewed respondents’ reports about their romantic and relational histories, including exclusive, committed relationships involving boyfriends, engagements, and marriages; experiences with non-marital cohabitation; and involvement in semi-committed and non-committed casual dating relationships. By taking this approach, I was able to get a sense of the kinds of romantic relationships women participated in. Information about what I call the “movement” in these romantic relationships largely comes from women’s reports about the nature of these relationships, and—in some cases—my specific inquiry about the timing, duration, permanence, or starts and stops in any particular romantic situation. I understand that based on the reports of 52 respondents, many of whom focused primarily on one or two romantic relationships during the course of the interview, there is a margin of error in the categories I created. It is possible that some women who are now married, for example, may have had a complicated dating or romantic history prior to meeting their husbands or in their current romantic relationships that they are unwilling to reveal, or women who are now in stable, secure romantic situations may diminish the details of the nonlinearity or
process that facilitated them getting to the firm romantic place they were at during the
time of the interviews.

First, I identified a pattern of respondents mentioning instances of movement,
shifts, and disruptions in romantic relationships. In addition to general descriptions of
relational interruptions, I also found that a number of women engaged in extended non-
commitments that never materialized into firmly established, exclusive romantic
relationships. Based on these two patterns, six categories emerged in the data: one-time
start and stop, repeated start and stop, return to a former partner, sustained non-
commitments, sexual infidelity, and concurrent romantic relationship. In all, 43
respondents (83 percent) report at least one mention of an instance of engaging in a
romantic relationship that did not progress stably or culminate in an exclusive romantic
relationship or simply dissolve when one or both parties realized that the romantic
involvement was not working. In all, there are twelve mentions of a one-time stop and
restart in any romantic relationship; fourteen mentions of a repeated start and stop or
multiple breakups; eight reports of ending a romantic relationship and returning to that
romantic partner after a year or longer; nine mentions of an extended, long-term non-
commitments involving the same romantic partner; twenty-three mentions of sexual
infidelity; and three mentions of overlaps in established, committed relationships.

It is important to note that some of the mentions counted in more than one
category of the kinds of nonlinear romantic arrangements respondents engaged in. For
example, one respondent reported an experience in which she resumed a relationship for a former romantic partner after more than a year apart (return to a former partner) and during the subsequent relationship her partner was involved in an extramarital affair (sexual infidelity). Also, to clarify two categories that on the face seem very similar, there is a distinction between sexual infidelity and concurrent romantic relationships. Based on respondent’s reports and my interpretation of specific events, sexual infidelity refers to an instance in which a respondent is involved in an exclusive, committed relationship and either the respondent or her partner engages in sexual relationship with another person. An overlap in a committed relationships or concurrent romantic relationship refers to an instance in which a respondent reports that her partner in an exclusive, committed romantic relationship is involved in a second, formalized relationship with another partner without her consent or knowledge. Based on the findings presented in this study, Black middle-class women are compelled to adopt relational strategies (e.g. relationship forms) as substitutes for the kinds of exclusive, stable relationships or marriages that they seek.

Results of this study suggest that women fall into one of six categories relative to their experiences with relational patterns and emotional experiences: 1) one-time stop and restart, 2) repeated stop and restart, 3) return to a former partner, 4) extended non-commitment, 5) sexual infidelity, and 6) concurrent romantic relationships. The data also suggests that their emotional experiences in the context of these relationships are
associated with four kinds of emotional responses to romantic situations: 1) optimistic, 2) realistic, 3) pragmatic, and 4) distressed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4. Percentage of Respondents’ Nonlinear Relationship Histories by Relationship Status, Marital Status, and Type of Nonlinearity (n=52)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nonlinear Relationship Histories of Sample</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondents reporting a nonlinear event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>By Marital Status</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonlinearity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Nonlinearity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reports of Nonlinearity by Type</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One time stop and restart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repeated stop and restart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Return to a former partner (after 1 year or longer)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended non-commitment (longer than 3 months)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual infidelity (respondent or partner)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Concurrent relationships (two or more)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding. In-depth interviews: N=52

Second, I analyzed respondent’s descriptions of their emotions in their reported romantic involvements. In an effort to capture respondents’ emotions, I was attentive to their reports of any expression of emotion about a specific romantic encounter, experience, or relationship. In particular, I reviewed respondents’ articulation of feelings of happiness, sadness, optimism, hopelessness, stress, joy, fulfillment, and contentment; mentions of direct connections between romantic relationships and seeking out a counselor or therapist; and any feelings of depression, anxiety, or any other clinical
diagnoses that respondents related to either an unrealized romantic aspiration or failed romantic relationship.

Table 5. Respondent’s Mentions of Specific Emotions or Emotional Status by Type of Relational Nonlinearity (n=43)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nonlinearity by Type States</th>
<th>Specific Mentions of Emotions/Emotional States</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One time stop and restart</td>
<td>Concern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repeated stop and restart</td>
<td>Frustrated, Hurt, Unhappy, Uncertain, Fear, Insecure, Shame, Disappointed, Depressed, Stressed, Unhealthy, Suspicious, Doubt, Self-deceived</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Return to a former partner (after 1 year or longer)</td>
<td>Open, Honest, Vulnerable, Confident, Self-Assured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended non-commitment (longer than 3 months)</td>
<td>Confused, Distressed, Unfulfilled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual infidelity (respondent or partner)</td>
<td>Anger, Sadness, Hurt, Disappointment, Embarrassment, Fear, Low self-esteem, Low-self Confidence, Anxiety, Deceived, Horrible, Lack of Trust, Hard to Get Close, Pain, Grief, Need for Revenge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concurrent relationships (two or more)</td>
<td>Disappointment, Shock, Hurt</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The emotions listed represent respondent’s specific mentions of emotions or emotional states in the context of non-linear romantic experiences. Some emotions or emotional states may not have been captured in these analyses.

For each type of nonlinear romantic experience or interaction, I list the corresponding emotions that respondents mention. The list is not exhaustive, as I did not ask each respondent specific questions about their feelings about every romantic interaction or process, but allowed them to speak spontaneously, without my guidance,
about each romantic situation. In several instances, respondents spoke at length about
the development of relationships, transitions into and out of committed relationships,
the events that catalyzed specific breaks or interruptions in romantic relationships,
and—in some cases—their candid emotions and emotional management strategies in
their romantic relationships. Table 5 details the precise emotions women felt in and in
response to these relationships. In the following section, I outline each of the kinds of
intimate involvements women engage in or settle for, including exemplars that show
how these relational patterns unfold, and women’s feelings that precede and emerge in
these romantic situations.

While not a specific outcome in this study, beyond existing scholarly research on
the romantic landscape for Black women, I was attentive to respondent’s own
perceptions about and expressions of relational uncertainty. In 96 percent of the
interviews I conducted, respondents voiced concerns about their own doubts about their
involvement in a specific relationship (self-uncertainty), expressed serious questions
over their partner’s participation in the relationship (partner uncertainty), or expressed
doubt about a relationship in ways that are distinct from concerns about themselves or
their romantic partners (relationship uncertainty) (Solomon & Knobloch 2001). Beyond
specific relationships and the uncertainty associated with them, more than 50 percent of
respondents articulate a palpable anxiety with respect to romantic partnering in
general—and, in addition—marriage, childbearing, and family planning. For instance,
every single respondent articulates a desire to become a mother, but many express doubt or anxiety about the possibility of finding a suitable partner (more than 70 percent) and some express concerns over the level of financial security that they aspire to in order to feel comfortable bringing a child into the world (19 percent). Moreover, respondents articulate a connection between uncertainty over romantic and relational outcomes and their own mental and psychological wellbeing. Emotions and emotional states such as fear, anxiety, stress, and depression are described in relationship to women’s uncertain romantic futures. Also, these respondents are between the ages of 30 and 40 years old, a stage in their lives during which childbearing and reproductive timing is of the essence.

4.4.2 Patterns of Nonlinear Romantic Development and Emotions Among Middle-Class Black

4.4.2.1 Women

One-Time Stop and Restart: “Can We Get It Together?”

A one-time stop and restart refers to an instance in which a committed couple makes the decision to step away from or end a romantic relationship, and then—at some point in the future—the partners decide to resume their committed relationship. Among the forty-three women who mentioned some kind of nonlinearity in their romantic relationship, there were twelve mentions of a one-time stop and restart of a romantic relationship. In some instances, the decision to end the relationship was made by a
respondent; in others, her romantic partner made that choice. Ultimately, the romantic partners resumed their dating or marital relationship.

Larissa met her husband while completing her undergraduate studies at a public university. She said that they had a great relationship and she knew that she wanted to marry him. She says that he was not superficial, and noticed and focused on what she called “the deeper things” about her. He loved that she was ambitious and she felt that he “really, really, really saw” her.

Throughout most of the interview, Larissa spoke glowingly about her husband and praised him for being the love of her life. Despite the generally stable, linear pattern of romantic development in their relationship, including a time where she fondly recalls him telling her, “I think I’m falling in love with you,” their relationship also featured a significant break. They separated once during their marriage for approximately one year.

Larissa explained that she and her husband legally separated due to their different beliefs about and approaches to money. They had both returned to graduate school and were “painfully broke.” Larissa grew up in a middle-class Black family, and she ascribes to the belief that parents should work hard and save their earnings so that their children do not have to take on large amounts of debt to attend college. Larissa’s parents paid for her undergraduate education, and she plans to do the same for her children. Larissa’s husband, on the other hand, grew up in a blue-collar, working-class
family. She said that his family operated on the principle that one should spend money when you have it, and her husband enacted these same patterns in his adult life. This value fundamentally contradicted her approach to finances and planning for the future. This sharply different approach to managing their shared finances ultimately led to Larissa to ask her husband for a separation. Larissa said:

   So that's how much it mattered to me. I served him the separation and that's how much, that's how much it mattered. We worked too hard. We worked too hard. To just let that all go … It mattered more to me. Everything else that this third generation continues is what my grandparents and my parents did, which was setting us up to be successful. I mean really they worked so hard so that our parents paid for most of my undergrad.

   For Larissa, it is not enough to be middle class. It is a priority for her to confer the benefits of her hard work and financial responsibility to her future children. While she did not experience any relational uncertainty related to herself or her partner in the relationship, her intense discomfort over her husband’s spending habits, and her strong beliefs about carrying forward the financial practices she learned from her parents, led her to feel uncertain about her marriage and to step away from the romantic relationship entirely.

   In the end, Larissa and her husband reconciled, but it was not without an intense process of evaluating their priorities as a couple and deciding to get on the same page with respect to their saving and spending decisions. She described herself as the kind of woman where “when I want to do something, I just decide to do it and that’s it”.
description of the decision to reconcile with her husband, Larissa does not describe a
detailed process of negotiation and compromise, but rather an immediate decision to
return to her husband followed by the negotiation of substantive matters related to
household finances. In the end, Larissa assumed responsibilities for managing and
investing the family’s finances with her husband’s consent. Today, Larissa and her
husband live together and are parents to an almost two-year-old son.

Like Larissa, several other respondents—including Joi, Leah, and Kendra—
mentioned instances in which they were involved in a formalized relationship or
marriage but decided to terminate the union, only to come back together at a later time.
Leah recalled attempting to end her relationship with her now husband while they were
still college students. Over time, she recalls that she grew angry, because she felt he was
not devoting enough quality time to their relationship. Leah decided the relationship
was not going to work, and left her husband after just a few years of marriage. Soon
thereafter, they reunited, reestablished their expectations in terms of quality time they
spent together, and committed to improving their communication with each other.

In the instances of a one-time separation or stoppage in a romantic relationship,
respondents express that there was a specific issue or pattern of behavior, either
involving themselves or their partner that created a sense that the relationship could not
continue without some significant change. At the same time, however, respondents
mentioned an overall fondness for their partner and a sense of contentment about their relationship.

*Repeated Start and Stop: “Break Up to Make Up”*

A repeated stop and start refers to a pattern in which a couple in a committed relationship repeatedly makes the decision to step away from or end a romantic relationship, only to resume the relationship at a later time. In all, there were fourteen mentions of a repeated stop and restart of a romantic relationship. As was the case with one-time start and stops, sometimes the decision to end the relationship was made by a respondent, and at other times by their partner. At the time of the interviews, some women were still involved in these romantic situations, while others believed that the pattern of starting and stopping with a particular partner had ended once and for all. Miriam and Valerie both described serious, long-term romantic relationships that were characterized by multiple breakups and significant uncertainty.

Miriam is a petite woman with thick, curly hair. She’s originally from the Midwest, and currently resides in Los Angeles, California. When I arrived at her apartment, I admired her warm, well-appointed, meticulous home. Towards the beginning of our conversation, I asked Miriam to tell me about her now ex-boyfriend:

Miriam: Oh, wow, where do I start?

LesLeigh: You said you lived together.
Miriam: We did. We lived together in this very apartment for five months and we broke up on Valentine’s Day, 2015.

LesLeigh: Wow.

Miriam: So that was hard. We dated on and off for nine years. He was a guy that I met in Atlanta when I was in law school during my first year. He was everything I thought I wanted in a man, like Howard grad, impeccable resume, church-going, God-fearing, loves his mama. Curly hair. He checked all the boxes. (I’m kidding about the curly hair. I’ve never had a hang up like that.) But he was great. He—at the beginning, and I’ll say this about him to this day—he’s a great person. He’s got a good heart. He’s very generous. He’s very kind. But as I grew, and he grew over the past several years, we grew in different directions, which I can elaborate on …

LesLeigh: Maybe you can tell me a little bit about … you said you were on and off for nine years?

Miriam: Uh huh. Well, we had dated on and off, and both “off” periods were determined by him. He suffered from a significant bout of depression over the course of our relationship and so during the times that the depression was particularly bad, he wanted to step away from the relationship and I thought by continuing to be there for him and support him and almost, you know, keep myself from other men, that he would eventually see this relationship was worth being in. He did appreciate me for being there. Like it felt like he wanted to move forward because of my ride or die-ness, and I think he genuinely loved me and, you know, and still does, and cared about me. But after … He had difficulty keeping a job. He had suffered significant job issues, and of course, this was during the course of the economic downturn as well, so I wasn’t hard on him in the moment. But he lost several jobs over the course, or had been asked to resign from several jobs during the course of our relationship. During a time when we were deciding if we were gonna get back together from an off period, he just received a new job, really cushy position straight out of business school in Atlanta. It was the first job where he would ever be making more money than me. At this point, we’d been dating for several years and I remember it like it was yesterday. He moved out, or he came out here, we had a great weekend together. This was before I had gotten my first job in Los Angeles. So I’d been laid off from my job in Washington D.C. and was moving here to look for work. I was taking him out on my severance money and my unemployment, because I just like loved him so much and he hadn’t started that new job yet. And so we
went to brunch and I’m like, okay, I’m ready to do this. Like I can move back to Washington D.C. Let’s make this relationship work. Cuz I hadn’t found a job here yet. And he was like, you know, things are going well for me. Like I kinda … Essentially he wanted to play the field. That’s what I took from that. And it felt like such a betrayal because he wanted to explore what his life would be like making this much money. And dating back in Washington D.C. So that was something that I never quite really recovered from and when he was ready to kind of come back and be in a relationship, he, I was kinda like, eh, okay, but I was never really into it. I figured at that time, I’d spent so much time invested in the relationship that I, you know, I would be okay with it if we moved in and he happened to find a job out here.

For both Larissa and Miriam, work and financial security and stability were central to their discussions of the development of their romantic relationships. In both instances, these women reported feeling some anxiety about or acknowledgement of their partner’s lack of either job security or financial responsibility. Miriam admits that her partner “checked all the boxes” or in other words, he possessed the perceived or actual qualities that a Black middle-class woman would desire in a romantic partner. Still, she admits that the cyclical, uncertain nature of her romantic relationship deeply affected her. In addition to experiencing the disappointment of multiple breakups, despite her significant emotional and financial investment in the relationship, her now ex-boyfriend did not choose to solidify the relationship once he achieved financial and job security. Instead, he withdrew from the arrangement in order to have the freedom to pursue other romantic opportunities. In addition to feeling betrayed, she admits feeling like moving the relationship forward toward marriage was not a priority to him.
Later in our conversation, Miriam reveals that even after his decision to explore other relationships in Washington D.C, she and her now ex-boyfriend ended up cohabitating in her home in Los Angeles. After her partner experienced another period of unemployment, he secured an opportunity to work in Los Angeles. Instead of moving to the city and living apart, they decided to live together and work on their relationship. The cohabitation and relationship ended when Miriam realized that she could not meet the demands of balancing her life, career, and the relationship. She worked upwards of 60 hours per week as an attorney, contributed significantly to their shared household as her income was significantly higher than his, and kept up with the domestic expectations of their living arrangements including grocery shopping and cooking. In the end, Miriam ended the relationship once and for all.

At the time of our interview, Valerie was expecting a baby with her husband of just over a year. She graduated from elite undergraduate and MBA programs, and today she is an accomplished professional living and working in New York City. During the course of our interview, she gushes about how happy she is in her marriage, and how blessed she feels to have found her “soul mate.” We discussed each of her most significant adult relationships; one in particular involved a number of breakups and makeups. Valerie says:

So [in] the second long relationship I had, we dated for a very long time. I recognized early on in that relationship actually that there were those, those elements that I wasn’t comfortable with, that didn’t necessarily live up to what I
knew I could have. So you know I had already seen what I identified as like not where I was trying to go. I experienced very young what it meant to have a great relationship and friendship with a partner, and then I was in a situation that had many pluses and many things that many people would be so upset about, but then had some minuses that had me scratching my head on how I began compromising. And I asked myself that for years! And I battled with it because I felt like I was compromising, um, but it was hard to let go for me, because of all the other comforts or all the other boxes I was checking.

It is clear from Valerie’s description that she had an idea in mind of the kind of relationship that was a good fit for her. At the same time, however, she wrestled with taking stock of the benefits and the downsides of the relationship. Later, it becomes clear that her wrestling over the advantages and disadvantages of the relationship are in some ways connected to her awareness of and anxiety over her potential participation in the marriage market. Over the course of several years, in fact, she questioned both how she came to compromise what she really wanted in a relationship and whether or not she should remain in the relationship. She went on to say:

... Like, you know, from a communication standpoint there were, you know, when it was time to disagree and argue, we didn’t argue the same way ... And I was dating, I was then in a relationship with someone whose idea of being in, you know, sort of combat, and really meant a level of disrespect. And I was like, I’m experiencing something that doesn’t feel right. And I knew it inside. And for years, I battled with that. I mean, *we broke up many times* because of that. I was feeling sad and crying in a way that I felt like, I can't believe this is me. Like this seemingly strong, confident person, like, quietly I’m crying and like sobbing all the time because we are breaking up all the time and I’m compromising who I am ... We broke up again, and I made a big commitment to it, and I moved to New York and a couple of months later, we had a conversation and got back together. I was like shit! I’m back in a relationship with this person. And I was trying to be single. But um again, I was weighing out pros and cons and thinking about things too rationally. I’m this age, and I want kids by this age, and I need
to choose a person who’s checking most of the boxes ... but I knew, I just knew that’s not how it’s supposed to go, because you shouldn’t have to think that much about love, your heart should answer these questions.

Despite her deep sense of knowing that something was wrong in her relationship, Valerie rationalized her decision to remain with her partner based on her desire to achieve certain life course milestones at a certain age or within a certain time frame. Valerie’s awareness that she should not have been with her partner and her decision to stay with him, alongside the back and forth interactions she experienced with her partner resulted in her otherwise-confident self experiencing sadness, distress, and disrespect. Valerie and her ex partner’s last breakup was particularly dramatic. She recalls:

... But in my heart of hearts, I knew. I knew for six of the seven-and-a-half years, I knew that something wasn’t quite right. And again, for I mean, going through far too many heartaches with this one person so I guess I went back to Michigan for the last hurrah or the last heartache, and uh, but what I thought was moving my life forward, ‘cause I was about to get married. And I got there, I found out that this person, uh, they had a relationship. They had a girlfriend and a fiancée on the side. (laughs) I can joke about it, but he for real had a girlfriend and a fiancée on the side. And that was devastating, because here I am a professional woman who was like doing the most, getting my MBA on the weekends in another state, and holding up a pretty solid career, and trying to keep my life together, my look, my friendships, and just doing the most... And when I found this out, I felt supremely disrespected. And that was the last straw. I stayed in the house a little while longer, because I still hadn’t mustered up the energy, I don’t know. I kept praying about it, like, I need to leave. I need to leave. It was heartbreaking, devastating. I got a therapist. And I mustered up, at the age of 30, the, the strength to, I moved back to my parent’s house. I was single. I mean, for-real-ass single ... To be single and to be alone, because I thought I was going to be like everybody else. I’m not going to be out here in the same pool with
everybody, trying to find the same people that everybody is trying to find. And that was a terrifying notion to me …

Despite her strong sense of self and self-confidence, Valerie remained in a relationship in which she experienced doubts, questions, uncertainty, and—ultimately—heartbreak. Not only did she experience significant uncertainty about her role or participation in the relationship, she had significant doubts about her partner’s ability to meet her expectations and relational needs. Valerie questioned her partner’s ability to appropriately communicate, and—in the end—she questioned her ability to maintain the relationship, given her deep sense of betrayal. For a while, though, her fear of entering what her friends found to be a particularly difficult dating market, and the fact that she appreciated some of her partner’s positive attributes, prompted Valerie to negotiate and renegotiate her expectations in the relationship. Most importantly, it is clear from Valerie’s characterization of the relationship, part of her motivation for seeking to maintain the relationship after several years of feeling uncertain and unsure was her awareness of the what she describes as the “pool” of romantic partners. She, and other respondents in this study, are afraid to remain single, and at the same time, apprehensive about entering a disadvantaged dating pool in which men hold more relational power than women, there are far more single, successful Black women than similarly situated available Black men, and in which there are clear disadvantages and privileges for Black women based on physical appearance.
For middle-class Black women, the fear associated with the dating and marriage market is particularly daunting, as I learned during this study, as they are bombarded with messages about the difficulties in finding a suitable marriage partner – “a good Black man”, beset by friend’s and colleague’s failed dating stories, and for some respondents, their own sense of urgency around marriage and childbearing. Valerie’s persistent feeling that something was “off” in her relationship was well founded. She was afraid, however, to re-enter an uncertain, disadvantaged relationship market in which the outcomes were potentially even less desirable or secure than her already established, but tenuous relationship.

Other respondents, including Joi and Grace, also found themselves in relationships that involved patterns of breaking up and getting back together. Lindsey’s experience was very similar to Valerie’s as she describes her involvement in a ten-year on-and-off relationship with a college sweetheart. Lindsey realized that she was not focused on whether the relationship “operationally worked,” but rather on an ideal or a fantasy of what the relationship could be. Nearing the end of the relationship, Lindsey was fairly certain that she and her partner were on the path to marriage, but when she mentioned her desire to be married in the next few years, her partner “flipped out.” She said:

So he had moved to Chicago and then he moved to Miami and then I was thinking about moving to Miami and I was, all of this was kind of happening as I was transitioning out of Westin [a law firm]. And then in 2013, I had a
conversation with him and told him that I wanted to be married within the next couple of years and he flipped… and our relationship kind of crumbled, the spring of 2013. So yeah, so it went from like 2002 to 2013. And I think ultimately, it didn’t work because like I said, we weren’t compatible.

After more than ten years of trying to make the relationship work and one last major effort on her part to move the relationship toward marriage, Lindsey and her partner ended their relationship and went their separate ways.

In relationships that are characterized by repeated starts and stops, several respondents expressed some sense of feeling or knowing that something was “off” about their romantic partner or the relationship. It is important to mention that of the fourteen mentions of repeated starts and stops, six respondents specifically mention a fear or unwillingness to re-enter the “field” or “pool”, because of their knowledge of how challenging it is for Black women to find a desirable, suitable romantic partner.

Moreover, for several respondents, there is a clear articulation that these successful, accomplished Black women are experiencing professional success and are conscientiously working on establishing a romantic relationships that lead or transition to marriage. For some, this means continuing to return to a partner with whom they have history and some level of familiarity.

Return to a Former Partner: “I Want That Old Thing Back”

Returning to a former partner is conceptually different from a one-time stop and restart, or multiple stops and restarts, since it refers to an extended break or absence
from a romantic partner, and then a return to the relationship after a year or more. There were eight mentions of a return to a former partner among forty-three respondents.

I caught up with Candace after one of her regular workout classes. She was fresh-faced and petite in stature. Candace caught me up on her now nine-year-old son’s latest antics. She shared with me that she is very intentional about how she parents him. She doesn’t believe in spankings, negotiates with her son, and teaches him how to express his feelings. The latter skill is of particular importance to Candace as she goes on to tell me about her tumultuous, unpredictable relationship with her ex-husband, her son’s father.

Candace’s relationship with her now ex-husband started nearly two decades before their marriage and the eventual birth of their son. They were high school sweethearts and continued their relationship into college. During college they ended their relationship, but they resumed dating again in their late twenties, and married right around her thirtieth birthday. About six months into the marriage, she started to have doubts that the relationship would continue to develop in the way she had anticipated.

First, she realized that her husband was failing to back up some of the promises and commitments he had made to her. During their courtship, he told her that he was content with her staying at home while he worked. She recalls that very soon after she
got pregnant, however, he asked her when she was going to start looking for employment.

Later, about a year and a half into their marriage, Candace learned that her husband had been unfaithful. She remembers thinking, “Marriage is forever… holy shit. I can’t do this forever.” She goes on to say, “How many more lies and disappointments?” At this point, Candace admits, she considered filing for divorce, but she had recently had their first child, and she did not want to raise her son outside of a two-parent family. Deeply saddened and conflicted in her marriage, she reports feeling like she could not deal with the lack of honesty and transparency in her relationship with her husband.

Candace described how challenging it was to wrestle with the psychological and physical toll of the relationship. During the course of our conversation, she describes in great detail several instances in her relationship when her husband was either physically intimidating or abusive. Once, while on a trip with family and friends, he choked her, and one of Candace’s girlfriends witnessed the attack. The friend confided in Candace that she could not “unsee it.” Despite this incident and the reality that her family and friends were now aware of her husband’s behavior, Candace stayed in the relationship. She reports that she thought every day about leaving him. During this period of their marriage, Candace describes developing body dysmorphia as a result of comments her
husband made about her physical appearance. She began to question herself and
developed low self-esteem. She repeatedly asked herself, “Why is it not working?”

After about ten years of marriage, Candace prayed about whether it was time to
leave the relationship. Very soon thereafter, a friend called her to say that she knew that
Candace’s husband had been unfaithful again. For Candace, this was the breaking point
in their marriage. For years, she had questioned herself and doubted the permanence of
the relationship. She had wrestled with knowledge of her husband’s infidelity, endured
violence, and compromised her own mental health. Moreover, Candace questioned
whether this relationship could stand the test of time. Learning that her husband had
been unfaithful again was too much for her to bear. She says that she wrestled with the
decision to file for divorce for weeks. One day, she said she asked herself, “Are you
finally willing to take a risk on yourself? You’ve risked it for love and for relationships,
what about you?”

Now divorced and open to dating and marriage again, Candace reports that she
has put a lot of work into understanding herself, what she is looking for in a partner,
and relationships in general. She says that she feels like she is still at “square zero …
because the information is only as good as you can practice it.” At the conclusion of our
interview, I asked Candace to tell me how it has been now that she is re-entering the
dating space. She says:
I think the thing with like middle class Black women is our exposure... we get that exposure of this is the way things could be, and that not only do we get to see it, we feel that expansion in our own beings and our own brains, that we can’t be like, we can’t be constricted. We can’t be pushed back down. We can’t be tightened again. And I think that’s what, I think that’s what makes it lonely and that’s what makes it like harder because at that level of expansion, there’s less Black men and the Black men that are there are not ready for that type of relationship. I don’t know. I guess, I guess the thing with Black women is that we’ve acknowledged that it all exists, like yes, racism exists, yes, gender stuff exists... You are, you know, you are marginalized.

I took from Candace’s comments that she is aware of how a romantic relationship should and could be, and at the same time, she finds that there are fewer available Black men in general, and in particular, there are fewer Black men who are willing to engage in the kind of romantic relationship she believes is possible. Moreover, she highlights an important point – she is keenly aware of the disadvantages and marginalization that Black women encounter in the romantic market. In fact, I asked Candace to tell me a bit about what it has been like going out and meeting new people as a single woman, and she shared the following:

...Living on the West Coast and living in San Diego, I’ve never felt more invisible. Like my friends and I always have the conversation. Do you go unnoticed like you are just not at clubs, at parties, like nobody approaches you?... And then I thought maybe it’s my age. Maybe we’re getting older. So maybe it’s that combination. We’re not young anymore so we’re not, you know, we don’t, we’re not those PYTs [pretty young thangs]. So we’re not getting noticed because of that. Or is it because we’re Black women and we don’t get noticed then? Or is it a combination of both? ... Out here, I still feel like more invisible. You see way more interracial couples, like I very rarely see Black men with Black women out here. Very rarely. Very rarely. The Black men are much, much more like, they just go for non-Black women. They really do. They really, really do.

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I asked her to elaborate on this point and to share a specific example of a time she felt “invisible”. Candace explained:

I felt more invisible because, what I like, my preference, like doesn’t show me attention out here. It’s devastating. I’ll never forget the time me and Christen were at a club, and it was a room of Black dudes, right? And it was like there all these White chicks behind us and the dudes were like this [she points as if she is pointing across the room] and me and Christen were like looking at the guys thinking they were talking to us. It took a minute, but we realized they were pointing at the group behind us. We had like, oh, sorry, we forgot where we were for a second. Our bad. We forgot. Yeah, it was like bad, like completely invisible, like do you not see us standing here? And then especially like we’re not bad looking. We’re not unattractive. By, like society’s standards, we’re like in shape. We keep ourselves together. Completely like sphew, overlooked.

While Candace does not make a direct connection between her previous marriage and her recent experiences in the dating market, she articulates a point that should not be ignored. She and other respondents aspire to a romantic relationship that is loving, secure, and committed. In the absence of these opportunities, Black women enter or re-enter the marriage market. In Candace’s view it is challenging to secure the kind of relationship she aspires to in a context in which there are fewer available partners who have similar relational goals or aspirations. Moreover, whether or not Candace’s characterization of dating, and even Black men’s racial preferences in particular geographies is accurate, or whether the experience she describes at social events are perception or reality or some combination of the two, these kinds of experiences inform and reinforces Candace’s beliefs about her desirability as a Black
woman in the age cohort of interest, and confirms her sense that Black women face significant limitations and challenges in the dating marketplace. In fact, despite the benefits that Candace should receive by virtue of her physical appearance – light skin, light colored eyes, and shoulder length curly hair – she still finds that she struggles with the same issues of desirability and commitment as other Black women.

Like Candace, Shannon describes a particularly challenging relationship that started in high school and ended while she was in college. She described herself and her partner as being very much in love, but during their relationship he impregnated another woman. After some time, he appealed to her and her family, saying that he was committed to changing and becoming a better person. After Shannon’s family began to integrate him into their family again, and Shannon developed a relationship with him and his daughter, she learned that he had been repeatedly unfaithful again. She said the following about the relationship:

...You know, he introduced me to his daughter. I started like to have an attachment to his daughter. I somehow, somehow got kind of pulled back in and I felt a sense of responsibility to him and to like our history, quote/unquote... I think when I discovered this one girl named Lakeisha and I discovered this other girl named Erica and this other girl named Ebony, and the fact that he had had someone else in my mama’s car and had someone in my family home, those were the breaking points for me.

Though it took almost another year and a half from the time she became aware of his most recent infidelities for Shannon to fully exit the situation, she ultimately ended the relationship.
Extended Non-Commitment: “Part-Time Lover”

During several interviews it became very clear to me that it was difficult for some respondents to secure the kinds of commitment and exclusivity they aspired to in their romantic interactions. In all, there were eight mentions of extended non-commitments. These interactions are characterized by ongoing sexual, intimate, and/or emotional involvement with one romantic partner without a clearly articulated commitment. In most instances, respondents expressed a desire to formalize a relationship with a partner, but their partners were unwilling to make a commitment to them. In some instances, as is the case with Olivia, their partners offered them a pseudo-commitment instead. These non-committed arrangements tended to produce and magnify uncertainty among respondents.

When I met Olivia, I immediately noticed that she had a very fun, laid-back disposition. She lives and works in New York City for a multimedia company. After we discussed her most recent committed romantic relationship, we have the following exchange:

LesLeigh: Have you been unfaithful in a relationship?

Olivia: (laughter) Okay, No technically, no. But I did lie. So after I broke up with Max, who was my college into being an adult relationship. He was not treating me the way that I felt like I deserved to be treated. I felt like he treated me like I was an accessory to life. And I gave him several warning shots. And he did not fix it. So I was like, I don't want to be with you anymore. And he was like, okay, let's be exclusive. That was my first encounter with that. Someone doing that [referring to exclusivity but a non-commitment]. Like, it just really doesn't make
sense. I would never do that again. But it doesn’t make me sense to me. Either you is or you ain’t! And so I was like, Okay, fine we are not in a relationship but we are exclusive. And I slept with somebody else, and he looked in my phone.

LesLeigh: What did he say to you and then how did you respond?

Olivia: I was like, ‘Oh, damn!’ But our shit was so messed up at that point. You know like. I felt like it was unfortunate because when we met each other, I think we met each other too young know? And we were both crazy versions of our current selves.

After a brief detour in the conversation, I asked Olivia to return to the issue of non-exclusivity and infidelity.

Olivia: I guess that is technically unfaithful. Oh, yes. So I was technically not, but … That wasn’t before. I can’t believe that I agreed to that shit. It was the truth. It was a trick question. I walked into the trap. I just should not have done that.

LesLeigh: Let me ask you this: how do you distinguish between “being exclusive” and “being in a relationship”?

Olivia: I didn’t. That’s the thing. To me it’s the same thing. And so he basically wanted to have his cake and eat it too. You know he, like, wanted to not step up to the plate and meet my standards. These are my emotional, how you’re treating me standards. But also wanting to keep me physically and keep me his. And I was like I was so exhausted by him, I just agreed to it. I never in a million years thought he would go through my phone. So technically I was unfaithful, but … Now, I wouldn’t do that. I just I would never ever do that again…

Olivia admitted that she wanted to be in a committed relationship, but her now ex-boyfriend was not ready to reengage completely in the relationship. By establishing that they were exclusive, but not in a relationship, a distinction that is still not entirely clear to me, both parties, whether spoken or unspoken, had the freedom to date, sleep with, and get to know other people. Even though she admitted that it was her partner
who did not formalize the relationship in a way that met her desire for exclusivity, it was Olivia who stepped outside of the pseudo-relationship. Olivia felt uncertain about her place in her then-boyfriend’s life. The undefined boundaries of their romantic relationship led both parties to pursue non-committed romantic agendas while still maintaining a level of commitment from the other.

Another respondent, Brooke, also articulates experiencing an extended non-commitment in her dating life. She describes recently dating a slightly older man. Despite the effort she put forth to support him through some particularly challenging financial and employment-related times, he never “stepped up” and made a commitment to her. Despite the lack of commitment on his part, Brooke says, “I was still putting one hundred percent into him, still helping him with his career. He has health issues. Still helping him with his health issues. Still looking out for him. Still you know, breathing life in him and his mission…” Ultimately, Brooke pursued other dating opportunities and opened herself up to meet other men.

These extended non-commitments created feelings of discontentment and insecurity about the relationship, and about the boundaries that respondents felt that they and their partners ought to operate within. Several respondents mention feeling like they wasted time that they cannot get back, and wishing that they had not waited so long to end or exit the romantic situation.
**Sexual Infidelity: “You Know I’m No Good”**

The next type of nonlinearity is relatively straightforward. Sexual infidelity refers to any instance of sexual intimacy or sexual intercourse outside of the parameters of an established, committed relationship. For some respondents, these transgressions took place during a committed dating relationship; for others, either they or their partners were unfaithful during an engagement or marriage.

For Faith, a 33-year-old research scientist, her path to marriage and family took one unexpected stop. Faith was 21 when she met her first husband. She had recently relocated for a job after completing her undergraduate degree at an elite public university. She admits that there were some early indications that her husband was not the right person for her:

When I met him, he was super funny, super sweet. Outside of a couple of red flags that should’ve been like hey, girl, no, uh-uh, not the one, but I was like, no, he’s so nice … And it turned out that he was a funny guy, and a likeable guy, like, if he wasn’t your husband. But he was a terrible husband, and I thought that he was kind but he was like the furthest thing from kind … I had just turned so many red flags pink, like, Oh, no, it’ll be okay. Oh, no, you know, he goes to church so it won’t, he’s not like this, blah, blah, blah. Oh, that’s just, he must’ve been really mad, or XYZ, so on and so forth, but he was not the person that I thought he was when I first started dating him.

Later on in our conversation, Faith revealed that her husband had engaged in multiple extramarital affairs:

… There would always be some situation where it would make me trust him less and less, and less and less, and so by the time we had been married for, I don’t know, two years, I did not trust anything he said. And I knew for sure that he
was more than likely cheating on me, but because I wasn’t ready to admit that I
failed at marriage, I was like, you know, if there are concrete signs that he can’t
argue away, like if I come across, I don’t know, if I catch him or if I have pictures
or blah, blah, blah, blah, like concrete evidence that nobody can refute, then
that’s when I leave … I found a text message of him and a girl talking about
having an abortion and that, you know, he was telling her she needed to get an
abortion and that they can’t keep the baby. But he was, but he was still like
inviting her over to come have sex in our house and all types of crazy whatever.
So then was when I was like, you know what? Gotta go.

Faith clearly stated that she felt like she could not trust her husband for a
significant part of their relationship. She had serious doubts about his ability to be
honest and faithful. While she had suspicions at different points in the relationship, the
revelation that her husband conceived a child outside of their marriage, coerced the
woman to have an abortion, and engaged in sexual activity with his mistress in the
home they shared pushed her beyond her willingness to maintain the relationship.

When I asked Faith how she felt about ending her marriage, she said:

I was sad. I was angry. I was disappointed but I was also relieved because I was
like, I got out of this pretty much unscathed. I’m not bitter. I don’t think that all
men are like him. We don’t have any children, so I don’t have to talk to him for
the rest of my life. Now I can focus on me and not having to wait on somebody
all the time. But I was sad because, you know, I did love him and we had, at that
point, been together for seven years and it was so much of my life … So I was sad
and I was disappointed that he didn’t think I was enough. So it was a lot of
emotions, but I will say mostly sad …

LesLeigh: How long would you say you were sad?

Faith: I was sad for probably about I’d say maybe about three months. I was sad.
And then I moved into concern, ‘cuz I was like, I am at that point, I was 29 or 28,
going on 29, and I was like what if I don’t find another significant other? I don’t
go anywhere. I’m antisocial. You know, like I don’t work with people that I
would date. I don’t go to social events. I don’t live where I’m from. I’m essentially in a place by myself. Where am I gonna find somebody else to date? And if I do find somebody else to date, how am I going to know that they’re, you know, how am I going to make sure that they’re not like him? So I was concerned, concerned, concerned. So I would say this was probably around month seven after he left. ‘Cuz what happened was I found out that he got the girl pregnant in March and he moved out in May. So this was around December and I was like what am I gonna do? I’m not going to find anybody. How am I going to meet them, blah, blah, blah, blah. And then, I met a lot of people that month. One of them happened to be my husband, my current husband.

At the end of her relationship, Faith expressed having some significant fears that she would not meet another romantic partner or marry again, and have someone to share her life with. Despite what she had experienced in her marital relationship, she made it a point to say that she did not believe that all men were unfaithful, or that there were not any good men left. Today, Faith is happily married to her second husband, a man who she describes as her “best friend,” and she has an almost two-year-old son.

In the weeks following my interview with Faith, I met Gail, a quiet, serene woman with long box braids, in a modern, airy coffee shop in Los Angeles. The 31-year-old school leader is mother to a young daughter. She was born and raised in a suburban area in Southern California and attended an elite public university.

Gail’s more than a decade-long relationship with her daughter’s father ended approximately one year before our conversation. She met her now ex-partner at a high school track meet. When I asked Gail what attracted her to her then love interest, she said, “In high school [and] in college, I was obsessed with talent.” She goes on to say, “I
literally dated some of the best athletes in the world.” In hindsight, she says that she realizes that she needed to feel that her partner was impressive and excelled at something in life. She was attracted to him because he was “confident, self-assured … arrogant.”

Even though they attended different undergraduate institutions, Gail and her ex-partner maintained a long-distance relationship. While she pursued a career as a classroom teacher (and now as a school administrator), her ex-partner pursued a career in professional sports. She recalls that at the end of his athletic career, unbeknownst to her, he became involved in illegal activity. Gail associates some of his “affinity for the illegal and the criminal” with the neighborhood he grew up in and the family who raised him. Still, despite their long relationship, she says that she did not find out about his involvement until just five years after the start of their relationship. She decided to remain in the relationship with him despite his involvement in the criminal activity, but she notes that there were other significant issues in the relationship, including repeated instances of his infidelity.

She also dealt with what she describes as “the drama.” This included his inability to fully support or accept her emotionally or psychologically. In the end, it was her daughter’s birth that gave her the fortitude to leave the relationship:

She really was the catalyst, the nexus to me being able to walk away. I’ve been off and on in therapy since I was like sixteen, so my therapist and I talked about, I needed something to force me to leave ‘cuz I just, I wouldn’t do it. For a lot of
reasons. But [my daughter] was, I could do all the damage to me but I would not do any damage to her so I could walk and I’m so much better now. It’s absolutely, not being in that relationship and having this little being that’s, she’s adorable, so yeah, those two things.

She went on to say:

I stayed out of fear. I stayed out of fear. I think we, why we probably stayed together was we held onto the nineteen-, twenty-year-old, twenty-one-year-old relationship for a long time. You know, when a relationship is new and young, or even when you’re young and in love, there’s so much idealism and dreams and hopes, and we held onto all of that every, for the next ten years or whatever. And constantly referencing it, holding it against each other, what it was then and, and each of us differently, but not wanting to let go of that and just mature and grow together. So constant conflict, but at the same time, we were both holding onto it. So, but I then, even when I knew that this wasn’t good, he wasn’t good, I was just scared. I was scared, you know, a lot of my friends were single so I was afraid of living what they were living. At the end of the day, I’m always going back to somebody so afraid of being alone. I’ve struggled with self-esteem off and on, so was highly concerned about anybody liking me, being attracted to me. I remember when I got to Michigan, I didn’t hear it nearly as much here as I did when I got to school, but “You’re cute for a dark girl” was the phrase of my freshman and sophomore year. So just, you know, I was afraid of just people not liking me because I was dark. All these things. And the thing, one of the things that Lionel was very, that probably attracted me to him is he was really attracted to me. And so that was safe. I knew you liked me and I didn’t, I didn’t have to risk that with anybody else, to see if somebody else liked me and was attracted to me. So fear, and we held on to the past the whole time.

Gail admitted that she stayed in the relationship as long as she did out of fear.

Much like Valerie, she was afraid to enter the same dating pool as her single girlfriends who had trouble meeting suitable partners. At the same time, she feared that she would not meet a partner who was attracted to her, in part, because of her dark complexion and her awareness that colorism creates a relational context in which lighter
complexions are esteemed more highly than darker ones. Though the relationship was marred by infidelity and lies, Gail felt secure in believing that her partner loved and was attracted to her and her physical beauty, a feeling that she was worried about whether or not she would find in another romantic partner. In the end, the decision to exit the relationship was not an easy or immediate one for her. It took well over a year to end the cohabitation relationship with her ex and settle into a co-parenting routine involving her daughter.

In relationships that involved infidelity, respondents report emotions including fear, sadness, disappointment, and a lack of trust in their romantic partners. Moreover, several respondents either explicitly mention or allude to experiencing lowered self-esteem and self work as a result of learning of their partner’s infidelities.

**Concurrent Relationships: “Two Lovers”**

Distinct from sexual infidelity, which refers to a sexual indiscretion that takes place outside of an established romantic relationship, a concurrent relationship refers to an instance in which a respondent reports that she or a partner are actually involved in two formalized relationships at the same time. There were only three instances of concurrent relationships in this study.

Josephine is a single, thirty-seven year-old woman with an infectious laugh. When she smiles, her whole face lights up. During our conversation in the conference room in the university building she works in, Josephine reveals some dramatic details
associated with a failed cohabitation relationship involving a partner who was still legally married to his wife:

Well, I was with someone, the person I was with for five years, we lived together in Richmond, and you know, my family, they didn’t really like him a lot. We initially got together, he was married to someone else, legally. Not that they were still cohabitating or anything, but they were still legally married to each other. And after we broke up, he immediately jumped back into a relationship with her. And my family didn’t like him mostly because he seemed to have some sort of association with her when we initially moved in together. We dated for about a year before we moved in together and I had a housewarming party that I posted, this was back when MySpace was popping. I posted a bunch of pictures on MySpace and his ex-wife saw them and she was really upset by it. Like oh, my god, he moved in with her, blah, blah, blah. You didn’t tell me that. She wasn’t aware that her son had been like, when he was coming to stay with us, ‘cuz her son was three. She didn’t know anything about me until she saw that on MySpace and because she was so upset, she was posting things on my page. My mother, of course, my sisters saw it, they showed it to my mom. My mom’s like oh, this is horrible. He’s obviously still seeing this girl. You know … Course, I was like, no, he says he’s not.

Later in our conversation, Josephine admitted that her relationship with her now ex-boyfriend caused a rift between her and her family because they were convinced (as she is now), that he was still involved with his wife during their relationship. She reported that she experienced a lot of regret about the relationship, not just because of his unfaithfulness and dishonesty, but also because she avoided her family gatherings and events for a number of years, and missed out on opportunities to be with them, because her partner felt unwelcome.

Respondents involved in concurrent relationships were unaware of either the existence of their partners’ other formalized relationship altogether, or had been
deceived about the extent of their partners’ involvement with a former lover or the mother of their child or children. In two specific instances, family members or close friends cautioned respondents about their romantic partner’s potential involvement with another woman. These respondents did not heed this caution. Whether respondents fully trusted their partners or engaged in some self-deception, or some combination of the two, is unclear. In the end of each of these relationships, once respondents became fully aware of the nature and extent of these romantic involvements, their romantic relationships ended.

4.5 Discussion and Conclusion

I addressed three goals in this chapter. I explored linearity and emotions in romantic partnering among middle-class Black women. In doing so, I challenged traditional notions of romantic partnering in the middle class as fairly straightforward, linear engagements, with clearly defined stages and processes. In place of this traditional conceptualization of romantic processes, I described what I call the movement of or nonlinearity involved in these intimate interactions. While there is no single, universally accepted definition for dating, as it varies widely across contexts, culture, ages, and religions, in the United States dating is regarded as a social relationship through which two people spend time getting to know each other to determine whether or not to formalize the romantic relationship (Busby, Carroll, & Willoughby 2010, Ansari &
Klinenberg 2015). In modern conceptualizations of dating relationships, there are instances of breakups, makeups, heartbreaks, and disappointments. However, I conceptualize nonlinearity as distinct from dating. Nonlinearity refers to the social forces and circumstances that constrict and shape the romantic involvements of middle-class Black women in ways that are more profound than typical dating relationships. In this view, nonlinearity is not just about the stable progression from one relational stage to the next.

Rather, nonlinearity is about considering the heaviness or weightiness of racism and sexism that adds to the burden associated with these relationships that make them harder to navigate, formalize, and maintain. In some ways, the burden of racism, sexism, and colorism contributes to these relationships unfolding in the manner in which they do. Specifically, for Black women there is an accumulation of reminders or signals that produces awareness that the pathway to relational happiness and security is not likely to be linear or straightforward. Nonlinearity is not just movement it involves constrained or limited romantic prospects and options, colorism and Euro-centric and “exotic” standards of beauty, and desires to be partnered with Black men and a lack of access and desirability to and for non-Black men. To be more precise, nonlinearity involves romantic involvements that are complicated by a type of Black tax in which racism and distrust that makes relationships weightier and more complex for Black women.
This study makes several important contributions to the existing literature on romantic partnering, life course literature, emotions, and marriage. First, an important gap in knowledge that this work addresses is research on the life course, romantic relationships, and emotions in the extant literature. This work includes emotions as a part of the discourse on romantic relationship trajectories. In addition to examining the diverse forms that romantic interactions take for middle-class Black women, I considered respondents’ reports of how these relationships and interactions involve their emotions and emotional states. Consistent with Knobloch and Solomon’s (1999, 2002a) research on relational uncertainty, respondents involved in nonlinear romantic relationships report sadness, distress, and disappointment, in part, due to their experiences with one or more kinds of uncertainty in their romantic situations (self, partner, and relationship). Moreover, I identified patterns of nonlinearity in the relationship histories in more than 80 percent of the respondents I interviewed for this dissertation project. In addition to reports of nonlinearity and a close examination of the corresponding emotions, I established links between nonlinearity the majority of respondents communicated and some kind of emotion with respect to the romantic relationship. At the base of the my analysis, uncertainty undergirded the patterns of nonlinearity, the emotional precursors to entering romantic relationships, experiences in the context of relationships, and respondent’s feelings about maintaining, returning to, or ending a romantic involvement.
A second contribution is that typically life course research explicates sterile, non-textured trajectories. In this study, I sought to incorporate and attach emotions to these trajectories in order to add meaning to why romantic trajectories unfold in nonlinear ways. I examined the emotions, feelings, thoughts, and beliefs involved in intimate situations and the emotional and psychological outcomes or consequences of romantic relationships.

In addition to contributing to life course literature by adding emotions to the discourse on romantic trajectories, I also add to the classic and contemporary theories on emotions simply by considering and examining the emotions of Black women. For far too long researchers have been preoccupied with examining the ways that Black women have “made it” and achieved educational and professional success. As a result, Black middle-class women have been characterized as capable, resilient, and strong. These descriptions do not represent the full range of Black women’s emotions generally or their emotional states in intimate, romantic relationships. One of the benefits of this study is that it draws attention to several areas that researchers should consider when examining the intimate and romantic lives of middle-class Black women. First, as Burton (2014) explains, a number of theorists and scholars have contributed to the scholarly discourse on romantic relationships, culture, and modernity, yet racial minorities are often left out of these discussions. In addition to considering the experiences of low-income and economically disadvantaged minorities, more inquiry should center on the
beliefs, thoughts, and behaviors of middle-class Black women and other middle-class women of color. In light of increased scholarly attention to singleness, living alone, and declining marriage rates, this kind of research would add to existing scholarship on life course transitions and trajectories related to romance, marriage, and the family.

At present, much of what scholars know about emotions is based on predominantly white samples. Starting with Diana’s experiences, and incorporating other single and married Black middle-class women’s relationship histories, I explored the relationships between nonlinearity in romantic relationships and respondents’ thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in non-committed and committed romantic unions. In doing so, I sought to expand the ways in which romantic relationship trajectories and stages are conceptualized, and to bring to the fore the emotional costs that many Black women pay in their pursuit of stable, formalized romantic relationships. Against the backdrop of a gender ratio imbalance of “eligible” Black men, perceptions of desirability, and their own goals of marriage and family, many Black middle-class women engage in romantic interactions that do not fully or completely meet their emotional, material, or relational needs. By incorporating Knobloch and Solomon’s (1999, 2002) work on relational uncertainty with Hochschild’s conceptualization of emotions and emotional management (Hochschild 1979; 2012; Wingfield 2010; Collins 2000; 2004), I examined Black middle-class women’s sometimes winding pursuit of relational exclusivity, commitment, and marriage, and urge further inquiry into the
emotional consequences of infidelity; unstable, unpredictable romantic relationships; and trauma and distress that Black middle-class women experience in their intimate lives. Much of the existing research on romance and intimate unions focuses, again, on low-income, single, and/or disadvantaged women of color (Nelson 2004, 2005; Burton 2014).

The results of this research suggested that the romantic lives of middle-class Black women are fruitful areas of inquiry for scholars interested in exploring complex, nonlinear relationship patterns and processes, the psychological and emotional antecedents and effects of nonlinear relationship formation, and how uncertainty (relational and economic), and its corresponding considerations and negotiations influence Black middle-class women’s decision-making in romantic interactions.

This study brought to light several findings that are of particular importance to the relationship between emotions and emotional states, uncertainty, and nonlinearity in romantic interactions. This study focuses exclusively on the experiences of middle-class Black women between 30 and 40 years of age. These results raised some concern about the ways in which social scientists and policy-makers currently conceptualize and measure uncertainty among middle-class or middle-income populations, and whether their current theoretical and methodological approaches take into account the social location of Black middle-class men and women, in ways that are relevant for
understanding the complex intimate and relational experiences of middle-class Black women.

For example, Lacy (2007) and Patillo (2013) examine distinct class experiences among lower-middle class, middle-middle class, and upper-middle class Blacks. In particular, Lacy (2007) found that middle class Black Americans who live in suburbs experience and maintain a complicated sense of Black identity based on their perceptions of themselves and their interactions with whites and non-middle class Blacks. One of the important contributions of this work, along with Patillo (2013), is that it contributes to the body of knowledge on “how middle-class Blacks conceive of their place in American society” (Lacy 2007, p. 6). In Black Picket Fences, Patillo (2013) explored the Black middle class' social and economic advantages, and also their distinctly racialized and classed barriers and disadvantages. One of the most salient findings of both of these scholars work is that the Black middle class is separate from and unequal to the white middle class, and being middle class does not evenly or equally confer comparable benefits across racial lines. Similarly, the present project demonstrates that for Black middle class women, despite their significant accomplishments in terms of education and career, the challenges they experience in romantic partnering are inextricably tied to their race, class, and gender. In other words, as Lacy (2007) and Patillo (2013) articulate, the benefits of their class standing does not wash away the effects of their racial identify.
In analyzing the data presented in this chapter, I initially focused on uncertainty in terms of two distinct concepts: relational and economic. As I listened to and interpreted my respondents’ discussion of their relational experiences, it became very clear to me that these two kinds of uncertainty are interrelated in ways that are different from the experiences of low-income women. For example, in Diana’s case, there were several dynamics at work in her pursuit of love, marriage, and family, both in the way that she thought about her dating and relationship experiences, and in terms of how she engaged in romantic interactions and situations. Not only was Diana keenly aware of her own accomplishments, she was actually mindful of them in her interaction with romantic partners. At the same time, she still tried a number of strategies to present herself in a way that would make her desirable to romantic partners who did not necessarily express a desire to be in an exclusive, committed relationship. As a result, Diana, and several other respondents, found themselves in uncertain, unpredictable, nonlinear romantic interactions that did not culminate in healthy, exclusive relationships. The kinds of movement involved in these romantic situations constitute a new way of thinking about intimate or relational uncertainty that has not been explored among middle-class Black Americans in the romantic or relationship literature. In addition to this relational uncertainty, in several of these case studies, respondents mention or allude to either their partner’s financial insecurity or economic security as a motivating factor in their decision to maintain or dissolve a romantic relationship. In
several instances, highly educated, financially independent Black women felt that they either needed to “hold down” their man while he struggled financially, or remain connected to a romantic partner because he possessed similar credentials or earnings, which signaled a kind of security to these respondents.

Exploring the romantic and relational experiences and histories of Diana, Valerie, and others illustrated the ways in which Black middle-class women think about and engage in romantic relationships in light of the aforementioned kinds of uncertainties, and with their specific relational goals in mind. These analyses uncovered a typology of nonlinearity in romantic interactions, including one-time stop and start, repeated start and stop, return to a former partner, extended non-commitment, sexual infidelity, and concurrent romantic relationships. These forms of nonlinearity directly related to forms of romantic uncertainty that have been discussed in the existing literature, such as self-uncertainty, partner uncertainty, and relationship uncertainty (Solomon and Knobloch 1999, 2002).

Women involved in one-time stop and start romantic relationships tended to identify a single issue in their romantic relationship that could not be worked through in the context of an exclusive, committed relationship. These respondents do not express doubt or uncertainty about themselves or their romantic partners, but rather there is some concern over the stability or permanence of the relationship based on a single challenge, issue, or difference. In these situations, respondents and/or their romantic
partners made the decision to suspend or end the romantic relationship until the issue could be resolved completely. Once the issue was resolved the romantic partners decided to reengage in the relationship, and based on respondents’ reports, these partners did not experience subsequent breaks or breakdowns in the relationship.

Respondents in the repeated start and stop category express a strong desire to make their relationships work, but experience consistent uncertainty or doubt about their romantic partners or the stability or permanence of the relationship. Accordingly, these respondents engage in relationships characterized by several starts and stops, and experience emotional highs and lows as a result of their involvement in these relationships.

In the instances in which respondents return to a former partner, there is a sense of hope that the respondent and/or the former partner has grown or changed in a significant way, or there is a sincere belief that the past relationship can be rekindled. For one respondent, Aaliyah, more than fifteen years have passed since she and her former lover had dated. Both of them have engaged in other romantic relationships, had children, and experienced heartbreak and disappointment. Now, according to Aaliyah, they are ready to move forward in a committed, monogamous relationship. For other respondents, the patterns or challenges that existed in the previous relationship persist into the newly formed one. There is still some sense of uncertainty, either about the direction or stability of the rekindled relationship, or whether the partner is a “good fit.”
Knobloch and Solomon (2009) identify ways in which relational uncertainty contributes to emotions and communication strategies in relationships. They find that changes in relational certainty or uncertainty are associated with emotional experiences in romantic relationships that feature conflict, jealousy, and expectation violations, and emphasize that individuals’ emotions and emotional reactions and behaviors influence romantic or relational outcomes (Knobloch and Solomon 2009). In extended non-commitments, respondents report experiencing intense, frequently changing emotions. In terms of communication, respondents express hesitancy or insecurity about expressing certain emotions or feelings, or even telling romantic partners that they require or expect to be in an exclusive romantic relationship. Some respondents articulate a sincere desire to be in an exclusive, monogamous relationship, and yet they engage in intimate relationships with romantic partners who do not express a similar desire for exclusivity or commitment. This pattern is consistent with previous studies of heterosexual Black relationships at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs).

A third contribution of this study is that it takes seriously the ways that race, class, and gender matter for the romantic and relational beliefs and actions of middle-class Black women and specifically for the kinds of nonlinear patterns their romantic relationships take. The respondents in this study are not monolithic or one-dimensional, and the effects of race, class, and gender in their lives are not cumulative. These effects are truly intersectional, and the patterns of nonlinearity reflect this reality. Ferguson,
Quinn, and Sandelowski (2007) explored the relationship between gender ratio imbalance and its relationship to risk of HIV/AIDS among African American women at HBCUs. They found that the gender imbalance involving higher numbers of Black women to Black men (approximately 2 to 1) on a college campus contributed to Black men having multiple sexual partners, and Black women agreeing to Black men’s condom use preferences. While their study focuses on HIV/AIDS risk transmission, they also examine the dating environments on college campuses. They find that Black women on college campuses have less power than men in sexual relationships and must decide whether to participate in non-committed sexual relationships or “man-sharing” as a normative process. Moreover, they suggest that Black men take advantage of the gender imbalance, and Black women must choose between engaging in a dating process that involves their partners having sex with other women, or disengage from dating altogether.

Not surprisingly, I find a similar pattern of behavior among thirty- to forty-year-old middle-class Black women. Due, in part, to real or perceived gender imbalances in dating, several women in this study engage in extended non-commitments with romantic partners who are unwilling to make a commitment to them, and/or are involved with other partners. One of the questions that I asked myself as I was developing this study was whether or not Black middle-class women could act as relational role models for low-income and poor Black women. One might expect to find
these kinds of ups and downs, emotional highs and lows, infidelity, physical and psychological abuse, and inability to secure a formalized, stable romantic commitment among low-income or poor Black women. However, a substantial contribution to the literature on romantic partnering is Black middle-class women adopt similar romantic strategies and accept relational forms that mirror those of low-income women. This finding suggests Black middle class women’s greater educational, financial, and social resources do not insulate or protect them from significant uncertainty and unpredictability in dating relationships, nor does it give them more relational power in their romantic interactions with Black men.

At some level, respondents seem hopeful that their aspiration for a commitment will be realized and the relationship will be formalized. Still, several women are aware of the unlikelihood that a romantic partner who does not express a serious desire to be in a committed relationship will suddenly shift into making one. This does not dissuade them, however, from engaging in undefined intimate relationships. Consistent with Ferguson et. al (2007), respondents are unwilling to opt out of specific open dating situations, or the dating market entirely, and instead choose to engage in relationships that do not align with their goals of stability, security, or commitment. The decision to engage in casual dating or sexual relationships with uncommitted partners is based, to some extent, on women’s need for sexual fulfillment, companionship, and connection with a romantic partner. Despite middle-class Black women’s economic and social
resources, these women still use similar strategies as low-income and poor Black women in engaging in temporary romantic arrangements (Burton 2014).

In terms of sexual infidelity, respondents describe instances when either they or their partners engaged in outside sexual relationships while in committed relationships. Though not elaborated in this study, I identified eight cases of revenge cheating: instances of infidelity by respondents that were in response or retaliation to instances in which their partners were unfaithful. Infidelity erodes the trust in the romantic relationship, and several respondents report feeling unsure about their ability to maintain a relationship with a partner who has been unfaithful and could potentially be unfaithful in the future.

Mentions of concurrent romantic relationships are relatively rare in this study, but these kinds of arrangements represent a unique typology of infidelity. In concurrent romantic relationships, either a respondent or their romantic partner is engaged in two formalized romantic relationships without their partner’s knowledge or consent. This arrangement can but does not necessarily involve uncertainty as it is commonly conceptualized. In this arrangement, one of three cognitive processes is being undertaken: 1) the person involved in concurrent romantic relationships is in the process of deciding to exit one of the relationships in favor of the other one; 2) the respondent or her romantic partner is in limbo about the two relationships and unsure about which partner to choose; or 3) the individual involved in two relationships has no intention of
exiting either relationship, and plans to maintain this arrangement for the foreseeable future.

The fourth contribution of this study is methodological in nature. Scholars have shied away from dealing with the experiences of middle-class Black women and have instead focused on low-income and poor populations. I found that Black middle-class women are an eager population to participate in this kind of research and in-depth interviews were incredibly productive in addressing issues related to romantic relationships and partnering. Scholars underestimate women’s interest in these issues, yet, as this study demonstrates, these matters are incredibly important. When researchers choose topics that are relevant to populations and are consequential to their everyday lives, respondents are willing to share these complexities with researchers who come with an earnest interest in these topics. Even though these were one-time, in-depth interviews, I was able to capture a great deal of information on process and emotions. As a start, this approach might be useful to others in understanding emotions and process, especially in an area and among a population that is understudied. Not only are there more middle class women who are first-generation middle class or have “started from the bottom”, because of the design of this study, both upwardly mobile and middle class women are represented in this study. At the same time, the opportunities for romantic relationships that culminate in marriage have declined as compared to previous
generations. As such, this was not a forced issue. Respondents were more than willing to openly discuss these topics and were eager to contribute to scholarship in this area.

A fifth contribution this study makes is to the study of Black women and mental health. Respondents’ descriptions of their nonlinear, sometimes unpredictable or traumatic romantic relationships, attuned me to their difficult emotional and psychological experiences in these relationships. Diana mentions suffering from a deep depression as a result of her involvement in several failed romantic relationships and said explicitly, “I thought about taking my own life”. Candace states that she struggled with body dysmorphia during her marriage and was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after her divorce.

While I do not have the respondents’ medical records or access to comprehensive data on their mental health, several reported seeking out counselors or therapists to help them sort through their thoughts, feelings, and emotional states as a result of their romantic involvements. It stands to reason that uncertain, unpredictable, sometimes nonlinear romantic relationships, either in isolation or in repeated patterns, can lead to significant emotional and psychological consequences for respondents. In their own words, they describe feeling betrayed, distressed, uncertain, depressed, sad, and disappointed in these situations.

The data suggests that women often struggled internally with their perception of their romantic partners, sometimes to the point of self-deception, and did not always
communicate the truth of their romantic involvements to their closest friends or families. Respondents did so, in part, to maintain a connection to their romantic partners. In some cases, women suppressed their own relational needs and adopted avoidant or passive communication strategies to protect or maintain the romantic relationship. These patterns in romantic situations should prompt social scientists to seriously consider the prevalence of emotional and physical abuse in Black middle-class women’s romantic relationships. Moreover, proponents of marriage, in particular among Blacks, should examine the consequences of unstable, unpredictable, nonlinear romantic relationships among middle-class Black women to determine whether marriage is actually in their best interest.

My interest in the middle-class Black women’s mental health and how it is associated with their romantic relationships extends beyond the women represented in this study to their romantic partners. In addition to respondents expressing their own emotional states, including feelings of low self-esteem and self-worth, or fear or anxiety about romantic prospects in the future, there were mentions of their partners’ emotional states as well. While not elaborated on in this study, several respondents described their partners as depressed or suffering from bipolar disorder, emotionally unavailable, hard to connect with, or not easy to talk to about important relational matters. Consistent with Beauboef-Lafontant’s (2007) findings in her study of depression in Black women, respondents in this study often set aside their own emotional needs to support or
advocate for their partners. As a result, it is possible that respondents experienced or suffered worse emotional and psychological outcomes than they would have if they had disengaged sooner from these relationships.

It is my hope that the research questions I explored in this chapter can also be systematically examined in regard to middle-class Black men. Absent from discussions of romantic partnering among Black women is any serious empirical analysis of Black men’s emotional, relational, and psychological needs in the context of intimate relationships. How do Black men think about and engage in romantic relationships? How does middle-class standing, or the attempt to achieve middle-class standing, influence the romantic and relational aspirations and actions of middle-class Black men? How do these men think about love, romance, and sex, and how central are these conceptualizations to their everyday lives? In the future, I plan to explore these questions. Moreover, in order to better understand the complex emotional, relational, and communication dynamics at work in these intimate unions, it would be ideal to explore questions related to the process of relationship development with heterosexual Black middle-class couples.
Chapter 5. Happy-ish: Unpacking Middle-Class Black Women’s Marital Satisfaction

In Chapter 4, I examined the nonlinear, unpredictable romantic involvements and arrangements that Black middle class women engage in and the emotions that correspond to these interactions. For the most part, these unwieldy relationships do not culminate in marriage. For many Black women, however, marriage is an attained outcome.

Given the demographic trend in marriage, it is particularly important to understand couples satisfaction in this increasingly rare romantic relationship. Relative to other racial and ethnic groups, at all ages Black Americans tend to have lower marriage rates (Raley et al. 2015). Moreover, compared to white and Hispanic women, Black women have higher rates of marital instability, are less likely to marry at all, and tend to marry later in life (Raley et al., 2015). While nine out of ten white women and more than eight out of ten Hispanic women were married by their early forties, less than sixty-six percent of Black women had been married by the same age (US Census Bureau’s American Community Survey 2008-2012). Their romantic relationships and marriages occur with less linearity, predictability, and—in some cases—stability, as compared to White and marriages (Barr & Simons 2012; Furstenberg 2010; Settersten & Ray 2010). Although there is abundant research on marital happiness and satisfaction
among whites, less is known about marital happiness or satisfaction among Black Americans.

In light of the need for empirical research on Black women’s marital satisfaction, this study seeks to answer several questions. First, what does marital satisfaction mean to middle-class Black women? Specifically, this study examines the ways in which Black middle-class women describe what they expect to receive or experience in their marital relationships, and what they value and appreciate about their partners and marriages. In particular, I explore how Black women talk about their emotions, their husbands, and the benefits they derive from marriage including “the good, the bad, and the ugly”.

Guided by symbolic interactionism, exchange theory, and intersectionality theory, I investigated three aspects of marriage as reported by respondents: (1) what middle-class Black women say they desired in a husband and/or the expectations they had of a marital relationship; (2) how respondents characterize marital satisfaction; (3) and how respondents make sense of the discrepancies, if any, between their expectations of a content, satisfying marital relationship and the reality of their marriages.

The existing scant literature on marital satisfaction among Black couples compares Black and white couples’ relative levels of happiness or satisfaction. Two such studies find that marital satisfaction and happiness tend to be lower among Blacks than whites (LaPierre & Hill 2013; Furdnia et al. 2008). Rank and Davis (1996) found that African American couples reported feeling as if "their standard of living, career
opportunities, social life, sex life, and life as a parent would be more favorable outside marriage” more frequently than white couples. Using longitudinal data, Orbuch, Veroff, and Hunter (1999) examined the social context of the early stages of marriage in order to understand the marital processes involved in, and the determinants of marital quality and stability among, Black and white couples. They found that a collaborative style or approach to marriage was more strongly related to marital quality among Black couples than whites (Orbuch et al. 1999). Family interaction and support were more consequential to the wellbeing of Black marriages than it was to white marriages (Orbuch et al. 1999; Taylor, Chatters, & Jackson 1993). In addition, several studies have shown that Black married couples have more frequent disagreements about sex, money, and having another child compared to white couples, and respondents in these couples are less likely to report feeling “loved” by their spouse. Moreover, Black women are more likely to feel less satisfied with the fairness in their marriages as compared to white women (LaPierre & Hill 2013; Broman 2005).

While the aforementioned studies elucidate some of the reasons for reported happiness or satisfaction in Black marriages, even less is known about the factors that may contribute to or compromise marital happiness and contentment among Black middle-class women. Some scholars have suggested that Black couples are more likely to support or contribute financially to the needs of family members than white couples, which can contribute to marital stress (Oliver & Shapiro, 2006; Marks, Dollahite, &
Baumgarnter, 2010). And even though Black marriages are more egalitarian in practice than white marriages (Marks, Hopkins, Cheney, Monroe, Nesteruk, & Sasser 2008; Sayer & Fine 2011), Black wives do more of the emotional work than their husbands to ensure that their relationship thrives (Strazdin & Broom 2004).

Some scholars have pointed out, however, that comparisons between Black and white marriages often do not take into consideration the ways in which most of America’s social institutions, including marriage, have been influenced by racism, sexism, and prejudice (Collins 2004, p. 250, 253). Hill (2004, p.19) elaborates on the ways in which race, gender, and class intersect to create tensions in romantic relationships between Black men and Black women. She argues that the use of white marriages as a standard for Black couples is problematic, as are the persistence of static beliefs about gender and gender roles for married Black men and women. She notes that “hegemonic gender ideologies remain strong among many Black women and men,” and that these ideologies create gender conflicts in romantic relationships between Black men and women and that, “The dominant tradition of “marrying up” is difficult for Black women, whose education and occupations often give them a status advantage over black men. Marriage has also always been problematic, as the history and race/class position of most Blacks are fundamentally at odds with ideology and logic of the traditional marriage contract. Their experiences almost demand greater gender equity
and flexibility in relationships, yet research provides contradictory findings on the extent to which they have achieved this (2004, p.18).”

It is essential to consider how dominant gender ideologies influence the relationships between married middle-class Black women and their spouses. While some research suggests that middle-class women perform more of the household responsibilities than their husbands (Greenstein 2000), other research suggests that Black men perform more of the household responsibilities than white men (Coltrane 2000; Erickson 2005). Of course, household tasks and responsibilities are not the only area in which men tend to be privileged over women. In this study, respondents—who in some cases earn more income and are better educated than their husbands—describe their responsibilities at home, and whether they feel as if these responsibilities are equitably or fairly divided between them and their husbands, may be consequential to their marital satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

5.1 Exploring Middle-Class Black Women’s Satisfaction in Marriage

The present study is motivated by several considerations. First, following Tucker and Taylor’s (1989) call for greater investigation into Black relationships and marriage, a number of scholars focused on the challenges associated with romantic partnering for Black women. Some of their treatises on the subject centered on the shortage of suitable or desirable Black men (Sawhill & Venator 2015; Wilson 1987); interracial marriages by
Black men (Crowder & Tolnay 2000); and romantic aspirations and arrangements among low-income and poor Black women (Jarrett & Burton 1999; Edin 2000). However, there has been no study that systematically examines marital satisfaction among career-minded, middle-class Black women.

Second, in light of changes to marriage, including declining marriage rates for all Americans and an unfavorable marriage market for middle-class Black women specifically, some tend to think of marital satisfaction for Black women simply in terms of the accomplishment of getting married. However, by closely examining women’s accounts of their experiences in relationships, and—in particular—in their marital relationships, we can improve how we theorize and conceptualize marital satisfaction and the analyses associated with it. In this study, I re-center the narratives of Black middle-class women about marriage and elevate the perspectives of the marginalized. In the analyses that follow, I highlight hidden heterogeneity among married respondents, as well as issues relative to fertility, mental health, balancing work and career, and socioeconomic status trajectories that may compromise respondents’ feelings of marital satisfaction in the short and long terms.

Third, scholars tend to conceptualize marital satisfaction as a static cognitive or emotional state, although it is actually a dynamic, evolving process. In other words, on the face of things, a marriage can seem stable, content, or happy, and happiness is
undoubtedly a significant feature of many marriages, yet there is generally a good deal happening behind the scenes.

In the sections that follow, I describe the conceptual framework and background research that guide this study. First, I present a framework of marriage, marital expectations, and marital satisfaction that considers the influence of sociocultural factors including the modern meaning of marriage, race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and gender. Second, I outline a description of the study including the research questions, data sources, coding strategy, and findings relevant to understand marital satisfaction among middle class Black women’s marital satisfaction. Third, I conclude this study by explaining how this study contributes to the body of knowledge on marital expectations and marital satisfaction among Black middle class women and intersectionality and exchange theories.

5.2 The Meaning of Modern Marriage

In Coontz’s (2016) classic books *The Way We Never Were: American Families and The Nostalgia Trap*, she describes three major models of American marriages: the institutional marriage, the companionate marriage, and the self-expressive marriage. Until roughly 1850, most marriages in the United States were institutional in nature. Marriages centered on the need for basic provisions related to an agrarian household model. In other words, the most important requirements for marriage involved meeting
one’s basic needs including food, shelter, and safety. Coontz (2016) mentions that experiencing an emotional connection with a husband or wife was desirable, but the emotional quality of the relationship was not the primary focus or goal of a well-functioning marriage during this period.

From about 1850 to 1965, many Americans embraced the companionate marriage model. In this model, marriages and expectations of marriage centered around individuals’ ability to meet each other’s intimate needs, such as love, intimacy, sexual fulfillment, and emotional contentment. According to Coontz, this era in marriage coincided with societal shifts away from agricultural societies to more urban, industrialized economies in which men increasingly worked outside of their homes. As the United States became wealthier, industrialization expanded, and social institutions grew more stable, Americans were increasingly free to look to marriage as a source of love, companionship, and emotional fulfillment.

Coontz argues, however, that since about 1965, American marriages were characterized by self-expression, meaning that couples view marriage less as an institution that is required or necessary for a meaningful, fulfilling life, and rather increasingly as a means to achieve personal growth, self-esteem, and self-discovery.

In addition to Coontz’s articulation of these three models of American marriages, other scholars have advanced the notion of the “soul mate marriage.” In this model of relationships and marriage, individuals place an emphasis on the belief that a romantic
union should meet their own and their partner’s deepest emotional and sexual needs, and through this sense of shared intimacy partners receive a sense of personal fulfillment (Amato, 2009; Whitehead and Propene, 2001). As a result of this focus on attentiveness to the emotional needs of marital partners, scholars find that “the emergence of the soul mate model of marriage on a large scale in contemporary society has made marriages ‘more joyful, more loving, and more satisfying than ever before in history’” (Coontz 2005; Wilcox & Dew 2010).

Consistent with Coontz’s findings, several scholars have argued that Americans’ expectations of marriage are greater today than they have been at any other time (Amato, Booth, Johnson, & Rogers 2009; Cherlin 2004; Coontz 2005). Recently, Finkel (2014) put forth the idea of the “all-or-nothing marriage.” In a newly developed perspective, he argues, “Americans today have elevated their expectations of marriage and can in fact achieve an unprecedentedly high level of marital quality—but only if they are able to invest a great deal of time and energy into their partnership.” According to Coontz (2005), the marital relationship is now expected to serve as an individual’s primary source of personal and emotional fulfillment. In her view, these increased expectations have resulted in marriage becoming increasingly more fulfilling in some ways, yet—at the same time—a more tenuous arrangement than it has been in the past. It is important to note, however, as the extant knowledge-base on marriage is considered
in this chapter, most of the research derives from studies of white middle-class couples and women.

### 5.3 Marital Expectations

Juvva and Bhatti (2006) outlined a model for understanding marital expectations. In this model, researchers posited that while marriage is a relational arrangement made between two individuals, it is also a social system influenced by a set of rules, norms, and sanctions. Of marital expectations, they argued:

“Spouses enter into marriage with their own experiences of living and interacting in a family, their experiences of exposure to both parental and marital models, and their own conceptions of how a marriage “should be” drawn from these past experiences. Such experiences manifest themselves in the form of expectations that are present in different domains of marriages. Expectations exist in the reality of the social life of a person and are present at a concrete and tangible level, which can be recognized and expressed. These expectations are influenced by the socio-cultural context in which we live.”

Marital expectations involve the behaviors or actions that individuals believe *should or should not* happen in the context of a marriage. These beliefs include how much time couples should spend together, how family finances should be managed, how children should be parented, the extent to which couples should have shared values,
how disagreements should be handled, and other issues pertinent to the stability and permanence of a marriage (Alexander 2008; Vangelisti & Daly 1997). In other words, for Black middle-class women, their beliefs about marriage and the expectations they have of their partners and their relationships are in part derived from their own relational experiences and their families of origin. As such, scholars should reasonably expect that the factors that contribute to a satisfying or dissatisfying marriage would be distinct among women who are raised in upwardly mobile or middle-class families; who observed healthy or dysfunctional interactional patterns in their families of origin; who come from different racial and/or ethnic backgrounds; and who experienced relatively linear and stable or nonlinear relationship formation. The present study will consider these differences among married respondents and explore how these factors may be associated with their reports of marital satisfaction.

Scholars have argued that individuals’ marital expectations influence their reports of marital quality and satisfaction. Bhatti (1993) argued that the quality of marital life is based on five components related to expectations: 1) expectations from each other as partners; (2) expectations from marriage; (3) expectations from the partner’s family of origin; (4) expectations of the institution of marriage; and (5) the image or concept of an “ideal partner.” Alongside these expectations, Bhatti also described how disturbances in the marital system are generated, including: 1) when the partner does not match the subjective image held by the spouse; 2) when the
expectations from the partners are discordant; 3) when the expectations of the institution of marriage are violated; 4) when the expectations of and from the family of orientation of the spouse are unmet; and 5) when there is disjunction at the level of expectations from marriage.

Marital expectations are relevant to marital satisfaction in that some scholars suggest that married couples are at an increased risk for marital dissatisfaction, and—ultimately—divorce, if marital expectations are too high (Sullivan & Schwebel 1995; McNulty & Karney 2004). On the other hand, other scholars suggest that individuals who hold high expectations of their marriage are more likely to receive a great deal of satisfaction from their relationship (Vangelisti & Daly 1997; McNulty & Karney 2004). In the case of marital satisfaction among Black women, little to no scholarly attention has focused on how middle-class and upwardly-mobile Black women’s marriages and relative marital satisfaction may be influenced by their experiences in, and observations of, their families of origin.

5.4 Intersectionality and Marital Satisfaction Among Black Women

Four years before Tucker and Tucker (1989) issued a call for greater scholarly inquiry into the state of Black marriages, Staples (1985) used exchange theory to analyze the conflicts between ideal family arrangements among Black Americans and the realities of their family arrangements and the corresponding structural conditions. In his
view, Black women marry or remain married so long as the benefits outweigh the costs of the arrangement. He argued that the typical cost-benefit analyses associated with marriage are “mediated by structural conditions among the black male population that give rise to dissonance between black family ideology and actual family arrangements.” Moreover, Furdnya et al. (2008) found that marital happiness for Black wives is compromised by educational gaps between them and their husbands. In a study of satisfaction among married Black couples, Curran et al. (2010) found that common themes among couples who reported marital happiness included (1) the importance of love and commitment, and (2) the importance of partnership or friendship, trust, family, and covenant.

It is important to note that race, class, and gender are not just discrete categories that define our identities. These categories stratify our society. Within this stratification, it is clear that many of the choices we make are constrained, and not simple voluntary choices. Marriage is certainly one of the choices that is constrained for middle-class Black women. In this study, I conceptualize intersectionality as a theoretical framework that considers how middle-class Black women are situated at multiple social locations with identities that overlap and—in some—cases conflict, and how these women navigate systems of privilege, opportunity, and oppression specifically in relation to their romantic experiences (Crenshaw 1993; Few-Demo 2014). Through this framework, I think about Black women’s romantic and relational lives as inextricably tied to their
respective social locations, social structures, and interlocking systems of racialized
economic, educational, and social inequality. In other words, intersectionality guides the
theoretical and methodological considerations undertaken in this study. Through it, I
make two contributions to emerging literature on Black women, Black marriages, and
the Black middle class.

First, I investigate the ways in which gender, race, class, and power intersect at
the interactional and structural levels to influence and shape one of the most intimate
aspects of life for middle-class Black women: their marriages and the ways in which
these processes are related to marital satisfaction. Adopting Hill’s (2004) belief that the
aforementioned issues actually put Black women, their marriages, and their families “at
odds with dominant societal ideals about the appropriate roles of men and women and
the proper formation of families,” I explore the ways in which Black women are able to
achieve marital happiness and contentment in their marriages, and the challenges they
face in doing so.

Second, I argue that there is no such thing as a one-size fit all approach to marital
satisfaction for Black middle-class women. Instead, I describe respondents’
characterizations of what marital happiness means to them based on their relational
expectations, and I outline a typology that describes the shared themes that contribute to
marital tension, dissatisfaction, and frustration among Black middle-class women.
Specifically, three themes emerged that compromise marital happiness for respondents,
including concerns related to: 1) economic stability and financial security; 2) balancing marriage, motherhood, and career; and 3) the desire for personal freedom and autonomy.

5.5 Methods

Analyses to address the research questions were performed on a subsample of the study respondents – that is only those who were married at the time of the interview. In Table 6, I highlight the demographic features of the subsample.

Table 6. Married Respondents by Age, Social Class of Origin, Occupation, Highest Level of Education, and Motherhood Status (n=19)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Social Class of Origin</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Highest Level of Education</th>
<th>Motherhood (Yes/No)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shannon</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Upwardly Mobile</td>
<td>Operations Manager</td>
<td>MBA</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faye</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Upwardly Mobile</td>
<td>Research Scientist</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Upwardly Mobile</td>
<td>Ad Tech Manager</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janice</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Upwardly Mobile</td>
<td>Non-Profit Director</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicole</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Upwardly Mobile</td>
<td>Non-Profit Executive</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trystin</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Upwardly Mobile</td>
<td>Researcher</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanessa</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Upwardly Mobile</td>
<td>Videographer</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terry</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Upwardly Mobile</td>
<td>Professor</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anastasia</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Upwardly Mobile</td>
<td>Attorney</td>
<td>JD</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leah</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Upwardly Mobile</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zora</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>Accountant</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kendra</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>Operations</td>
<td>MBA</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabrielle</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>Physician</td>
<td>MD</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valerie</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>Business Executive</td>
<td>MBA</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camille</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>Entrepreneur</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larissa</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>Human Resources Manager</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faye</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>Event Planner</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>Business Manager</td>
<td>MBA</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diana</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>Attorney</td>
<td>JD</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Valerie, Zora, and Diana were first-time expectant mothers at the time of our interviews; Camille was expecting a third child. Nicole is a stepmother to two daughters.
All of the respondents in this study hold at least a bachelor’s degree. Ten were raised in upwardly mobile families, and nine in firmly middle-class households. The respondents’ occupations include scientists, event planners, teachers, researchers, attorneys, and managers. Among upwardly mobile women in this study, one has a bachelors (BA) degree; five hold master’s (MA) degrees; one earned a Master’s in Business Administration (MBA) degree; one has a Juris Doctor (JD) degree; and two hold Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degrees. Among respondents who grew up in middle-class families, four hold master’s degrees; three hold Master’s in Business Administration degrees; and one has a Juris Doctor. Eleven respondents are mothers, three are first-time expectant mothers, and five do not have children.

As I closely examined married respondents’ thoughts, feelings, and experiences, I paid particular attention to their attitudes and beliefs about their marriages and/or marital partner; mentions of happiness, joy, pleasure, satisfaction, dissatisfaction, frustration, compromise or settling; and any suggestion that respondents were more or less satisfied with their marital relationship.

In addition to symbolic interactionism, exchange and intersectionality theories informed my thinking as I prepared interview questions for this study, and guided my analyses as I examined these data. By recognizing the ways in which race, class, and gender are experienced simultaneously within an individual, and—at the same time—how gender and race are intertwined in cultural beliefs about romance, love, romantic
partnering, and in social institutions such as marriage and the family (Collins 1993; Crenshaw 1993; Settles 2006), I seek to describe Black women’s expectations of their partners, their marriages, and themselves, and how they experience marriage and negotiate their roles as married women, working professionals, and—in some cases—as mothers.

### 5.5.1 Data Sources

The interview schedule (see Appendix 1) was designed to shed light on a variety of processes and experiences among single and married middle-class Black women. The current study specifically focused on married respondents’ responses to questions including the following:

- What kinds of men are you/were you attracted to? What are you looking for in a partner?
- Some people have told me that what they wanted in a partner was different when they were younger than it is now. When you were 15/16, what did you think your romantic life would be like now?
- When you were in college, what kind of guy did you think you would end up with?
- Can you walk me through how you communicated your expectations to your last romantic partner?
— What kinds of hard decisions have come up in your romantic relationships?

— What compromises or trade-offs are you willing to make in your pursuit of romantic partnership?

— I’ve heard women describe marriage as hard work. Does that phrase resonate with you, or would you describe it or characterize it a different way?

Participants were asked many more questions than the ones listed above. I probed for more in-depth responses, or more clarity in responses, when necessary. Responses to the above questions were included in the analysis, but participants also talked about relational and marital expectations, experiences, satisfaction, and dissatisfaction throughout the interview. The full transcripts were reviewed for pertinent information to answer each research question.

In addition to the full interview transcripts of 19 married respondents, data sources for this study include field notes, memos, and a demographic questionnaire that respondents completed at the conclusion of their interviews.

5.5.2 Data Coding

Consistent with the two previous studies in this dissertation, I used a modified grounded theory approach to code the data. First, I used an open coding strategy with common codes and sensitizing concepts to examine the transcribed interview data, the
demographic questionnaires, field notes, and memos (Glaser 1978). Second, I identified common patterns in coding within and across cases using constant comparison (Huberman and Miles 1994). By taking this approach, I was able to identify patterns in: 1) the ways in which respondents talked about their expectations of their partners and marriages, 2) the nature and quality of respondents’ marriages; 3) expressions of emotions and sentiments related to marital satisfaction, including pleasure, joy, happiness, and peace of mind; and expressions of dissatisfaction, including frustration, exhaustion, fear, or anxiety. For each transcribed interview, for example, I coded for particular mentions of stability, support, uncertainty, or distress related to respondents’ marriages or their husbands. I also coded for particular emotions: happiness, peace, fun, distress, depression, and frustration.

In the final phase of coding, I used selective coding, which involves identifying a main storyline in my analyses (LaRossa 2005). In the analyses that follow I use exemplars to present my findings to give readers an understanding of how respondents construct meaning and interpret particular events or states in their marriages. As a note, among the 19 respondents, there is variability in how they describe their happiness and contentment in marriage. These data reveal that the notion of a one-size-fits-all model of happiness that is pervasive in this sample.
5.6 Findings

It is important to note that research on marital distress and dissatisfaction has made two important strides in the last twenty years. First, a satisfying marriage does not require the absence of dissatisfying or distressing events, emotions, or processes. Second, scholars who study marital satisfaction are clear that the absence of dissatisfying characteristics does not necessarily denote a stable, healthy marriage. Instead, scholars are increasingly interested in understanding and exploring marital quality in which the satisfying and dissatisfying characteristics are equally recognized (Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach 2000). In this study that focuses exclusively on the marital satisfaction of middle-class Black women, I examine the aspects of marriage from which they derive satisfaction, and also the areas that they find to be dissatisfying or frustrating.

5.6.1 Marital Satisfaction and Happiness

Of the nineteen married women in this study, every respondent indicated that some parts of their marriage brought them joy, contentment, or satisfaction. The aspects that made them feel satisfied or content, however, were often very different in terms of the specific qualities or experiences that made them happy and in terms of the intensity of their satisfaction. In this section, I use exemplars of upwardly mobile and middle-class married respondents who characterize their husbands and marriages as positive and fulfilling to delineate the differences among respondents and their reports of marital satisfaction.
5.6.2 “The Living is Easy”

The women that fit into this category would consider their marriages to be a calm, predictable rhythm with minimal or negligible conflict. During my interview with Valerie, I learned that she was clear about communicating with romantic partners about relationships, especially about how she wants to be treated and how she wants to feel. During our conversation she told me about her serious dating relationships and communicates that she “had more definitive ideals for what I wanted in life.” She said that she communicated to her partner explicitly what she wanted. Specifically, she said, “I’ve always been very confident and have said that I want to be in a relationship that feels like this. And I won’t be in a relationship that doesn’t feel this way, where I can’t talk this way, or can’t voice my opinion…”

It was very clear to me that Valerie, who is approaching her second wedding anniversary with her husband Zach, had very clear expectations about what brought her relationship satisfaction. She explained:

I’ve never said that I want a man who’s going to buy me a house or something like that, but I have said that I want a man who is fiscally responsible, that can show me they are the head of the household, that I don’t ever have to worry…That’s what I desire and I’ve always very much said that. And if you fit the bill, okay. If you’re intimidated by that, or if you’re like, This girl is wanting something else that I’m not, I think it is good to recognize that very quickly. It’s never been, ‘I want this. Give me this.’ It’s more like, This is what happiness looks like in the world of Valerie. Does my world get along with your world?
When I probed Valerie and asked her why she married her husband, she shared, “I know it sounds super cliché to even say so, but in real life I feel like he was I created for me and I was created for him. We just have such a nice interaction, just our existence together, we just enhance each other's existence. And it's just, the living is easy with him.”

When I asked her whether marriage was hard work, she immediately said, “No. But you know, it’s funny. When Zach talks about it, he’s used that line.” She goes on to elaborate, “I don’t see this as hard work at all. I want my husband to be happy. I don’t feel like it’s that hard to make him happy, because we have the same idea of what happiness is... I like to talk to him several times a day to just talk about nothing... We just enjoy sitting on the couch together and watching Frankie and Grace.”

I asked Zora, an accountant and expectant mother, to tell me about her marriage and whether it feels like hard work. She responded, “… I feel like hard work just has a bad connotation. I feel like it’s work, but it’s work that you sign up for. It’s like the work that I want to do to, not just live a happy life. […] I feel like your life is built up of the choices you make every day. Am I gonna choose to be happy with this person? […] I feel like it’s a lot of work within yourself to make those good choices every day for this person that you say you love and you want to spend the rest of your life with, and you want to enjoy as many happy moments as possible.” From Zora’s perspective, the work that she puts into her marriage is rewarding for her. The happiness she enjoys is, in part, a direct result of the effort that she puts into her relationship.
Similarly to Valerie and Zora, when I asked Camille, a mother and entrepreneur who has been married for eight years how her marriage is going and whether she would describe it as hard work, she responded, “Yeah! People say that! You know, you see on Facebook, on people’s anniversaries, like ‘marriage is hard work.’ Life is hard work. The marriage helps you get through the hardness of life. Really! I don’t get the hard work thing. I really thought about that. Like, where is everybody getting this hard work thing from? Like maybe I’m missing something. What I do feel like life throws curveballs, but I feel like marriage, your spouse is the one who gets you through it. Raising kids is hard work. But we try to do it together. We’re having fun with it.” For Camille, her marriage is a source of strength, support, and fun.

5.6.3 “My Marriage is My Safe Space”

Women in this category have clear boundaries about intrusions in their relationship. Intrusions include issues such as stress, negative attributions, or pessimistic affects. For them, marriage feels like it has a calm, supportive, teammate-like quality, and respondents report avoiding or putting issues in their proper place that could cause issues in their relationships. After a challenging long-term romantic relationship, Anastasia described becoming vocal about her relational expectations and her desire to communicate these expectations to her now husband. She said, “I was thirty-two, and I found my voice. I was not afraid to say that I wanted to get married. I wanted to have a
family. I wanted to be somewhere I could put down roots and grow... I was like, Listen, I've done everything that I was supposed to do society-wise. I'm self-sufficient. I'm educated. I'm in my own career. I can do what I want by myself. But I want a husband.”

She went on to say that she became very clear that she wanted to “get about the business of living my life with someone who can go on adventures with me.” Anastasia found that her husband was very much in the same place in his life when they met. I asked whether she felt her marriage was challenging or required hard work, and she responded, “For me, my marriage is my safe space. He has a very stressful job, but when he comes home, this house is his safe space... Sometimes you don't want to remind him to do stuff. You know? That's annoying. But is it hard? No.” For Anastasia, feeling safe and secure is a source of satisfaction in her marriage.

Similar to Anastasia, Gabrielle and her husband have a team-like approach to their marital relationship and find a great deal of support and strength in each other. During our interview, Gabrielle explains how her husband supported her as she prepared for her board exams. She said, “I haven’t been working full-time until recently, and it was really because David was taking on all of the financial responsibility and allowing me to study for my boards. It was nice to have a bit of a break and to focus on my exams knowing that I didn’t have to worry. I had a nice little sabbatical.” Apart from the busyness of her career, Gabrielle emphasized that husband was the first man she dated who was fully supportive of her career aspirations. She said, “…I told him, this is
the residency I want to be in. How about you follow me? David was the first man who showed me that he was supportive of my goals. He did that by sending me care packages while we were dating and even now... I would like to move back to my hometown and open a practice. And he was like ‘Cool, I’m down’”. Later in our conversation, she described their approach to household responsibilities and said, “He didn’t like cleaning. So I do the cleaning. I don’t like cooking, so he does the grocery shopping and meal prepping. And you know what, [laughs], most of the time, he does my chores too… I used to feel so bad about it, because he has a grueling job too. But it’s nice to have someone to do all this stuff with… for us, we had to be honest about our shortcomings and strengths and come together and work those things out.”

For Anastasia, Gabrielle and others, their marriages make them feel secure, grounded, and supported. In light of their and their husbands busy, sometimes stressful professional lives, a major priority in their marriages was to have a partner who was understanding of the demands of their work lives and who could make them feel safe and affirmed in their relationship.

5.6.4 “I Know I Can Trust Him”

Women in this category do not subscribe to a generalized distrust of men. They trust their husbands on their own terms. Nicole is an executive in a non-profit organization. Generally content and satisfied in her relationship with her husband, she
rejects the notion that they are each other’s soul mates. She stated emphatically that they were not “made for each other,” but she believes that she and her husband have compassion for each other and are supportive of each other “even when they are on their own shit.” I asked Nicole how she knew that she wanted to marry her husband. She said, “I’m so proud of his strength, his work ethic, the way that he loves me and encourages me and is there for me. It’s unwavering. He knows how to push and support. At the same time, I don’t trust everybody. I have issues with trust, and I have a hard time listening to people that I don’t think truly mean me any good, right? […] I know I can trust him.”

For Faye, after being friends with her husband for a number of years prior to deciding to date or get married, she said, “You know, I chose him, because I found someone who loved me and would do anything for me… That he was going to love me no matter what. He loved me for who I was and accepted me for who I am.” Later in our conversation we talked a bit about trust in her marriage. Without hesitation, Faye said, “…I knew he would take care of me… I knew that he would take care of my heart, take care of my emotions. I knew he wouldn’t hurt me. Not intentionally anyway.” It is not simply what Faye said that stood out to me, it was the confidence and the conviction with which she said it. In all of her years of knowing her husband, being friends first, and later husband and wife, she had accumulated some knowledge about his character that affirmed for her that she could totally and completely trust him with her heart and
their growing family. For Nicole, Faye and other respondents, their ability to trust their partners deepened and grounded their happiness and satisfaction in their marriages.

5.6.5 “You Have to Put in a Lot of Work”

For some respondents, they believed that a content, satisfying marriage required hard work and attention. For them, while happy in ways, their marriages were also a project of sorts that required patience, compromise, and refinement. I met with Janice, a nonprofit manager, in her home in Chicago. She and her husband have been married for a little over a year, and have been a couple for more than four years. After discussing how they decided to formalize their relationship, I asked Janice whether she would describe marriage as hard work. Without hesitation, she responded:

My back’s breaking. [laughs] No. It is absolutely one of those things where they’re like, you know all the clichés, like hard work pays off and hard work like blah, blah, blah. Like absolutely, I would choose [my husband] every time. You know, I would choose marriage every time. But it is absolutely hard work... So I think, Number One, it’s hard work, but it should be. You know, you’re gonna be with this person, hopefully, for the rest of your lives, knowing that you both are changing people…. So I feel like it’s normal that it’s hard work, or that you have to put in a lot of work. I think there’s a certain part of it that’s just like annoying hard work, where it’s like, Lord. And I also feel like there are growing pains that maybe ebb and flow where it’s like, This shouldn’t be this hard. I don’t know if that makes sense but overall, I feel like having a successful, fulfilling relationship will take hard work and dedication, and I think that’s normal.

While holding positive sentiments about her relationship, Janice acknowledges that she and her husband are both evolving and changing over time, and that these changes require attention and effort by both of them. While she refers to her marriage as
hard work, she normalizes this experience and contextualizes it as something an individual should do in order to have a fulfilling, stable marital relationship.

Valerie, Anastasia, Zora, Camille, Faye, Gabrielle, and Janice each describe the positive, beneficial aspects of their relationships, including seeking to make their partners happy, finding joy and stability in their spouses, and seeing their marriages and their husbands as sources of support, trust, and contentment, in both good and bad times. Other respondents view or describe their marriages as hard work. For them, the effort they put forth in their marital relationships actually helps them to achieve similar emotional and psychological outcomes as the respondents who did not report feeling that their marriages were hard work. In other words, respondents who reported that marriage was hard work and those who did not expressed similar sentiments about their overall contentment or satisfaction in their marital relationships.

5.6.6 “Pursuit of the American Dream”

For some respondents, their happiness or relational contentment is associated with securing aspects of “The American Dream” including a home, savings, the ability to travel, and experience financial freedom. I asked Kendra what she felt it would take for her and her husband to experience “content ever after.” She replied:

That’s hard for me now because, on one hand, my gut wants to say two homes. A kid or two. Lots of travel. Lots of laughing. Health. But that is starting to scare me. That feels like I’m on a path of nice, middle-class living and I feel like I would be missing a sense of adventure. I worry that when I get older I might
kind of start to feel resentful. So I am losing sight of what I think a picture could be seen like happily ever after really. But probably like something along those lines, like a little American dream would be fine, maybe.

For Kendra, having a thriving marriage means balancing her desire for a stable, more than middle-class life with her need for adventure. Similarly, for Faye, while happy in her marital relationship, after ten years of marriage, she explained that there was not anything new or exciting about the relationship and this was something she desired to feel again with her husband. She said that she loved her husband, but there were “no more new stories. We know everything there is to know about each other. And with a new baby, there isn’t much exciting going on right now.”

Again, there is no one-size-fits-all set of qualities, characteristics, or requirements that create satisfying or fulfilling marriages for all middle-class Black women. Moreover, I find that some respondents believe that their marital relationships are hard work, while others do not. Again, based on my interviews, I was unable to develop a clear typology for discrete characteristics or themes that are necessarily associated with marital satisfaction.

On the other hand, in the next section I outline emergent themes that compromise respondents’ marital satisfaction. Specifically, I identify areas in which respondents articulate that they are only somewhat satisfied, have significant anxiety, or are completely dissatisfied. I consider the dominant aspects of their marriages or the prevailing features that characterize their marriages according to respondents. Three
specific themes emerged in relation to Black middle-class women’s frustrations or dissatisfactions in their marital relationships: 1) challenges to economic stability and security; 2) difficulties of balancing work and motherhood; and 3) an awareness of personal sacrifices that respondents make for the good of the family.

5.6.7 Economic Stability and Security

Discussion of dissatisfaction is rooted in educational and economic characteristics and behaviors of respondents’ spouses. Therefore, I first present an overview of spouse’s education and earnings.

Table 7 includes data about respondents and their husband’s highest level of education and earnings.
Table 7. Respondent’s and Husband’s Highest Level of Education and Income (n=19)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Respondent’s Highest Level of Education/Income</th>
<th>Husband’s Highest Level of Education/Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shannon</td>
<td>MBA $100,000</td>
<td>BA $0*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith</td>
<td>MA $84,000</td>
<td>BA $81,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>MA $100,000</td>
<td>MBA $80,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janice</td>
<td>MA $83,000</td>
<td>MA $63,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicole</td>
<td>MA $160,000</td>
<td>BA $110,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trystin</td>
<td>PhD $25,000</td>
<td>MA $50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanessa</td>
<td>BA $0**</td>
<td>MA $270,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terry</td>
<td>PhD $65,000</td>
<td>JD $90,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anastasia</td>
<td>JD $128,000</td>
<td>MBA $125,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leah</td>
<td>MA $65,000</td>
<td>BA $58,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zora</td>
<td>MA $123,000</td>
<td>BA $85,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kendra</td>
<td>MBA $200,000</td>
<td>MA $140,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabrielle</td>
<td>MD $0*</td>
<td>MD $270,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valerie</td>
<td>MBA $150,000</td>
<td>BA $130,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camille</td>
<td>MA $36,000***</td>
<td>JD $0**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larissa</td>
<td>MA $51,250</td>
<td>MA $71,750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faye</td>
<td>MA $0**</td>
<td>BA $240,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer</td>
<td>MBA $115,000</td>
<td>MBA $135,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diana</td>
<td>JD -- ***</td>
<td>BA/ -- ***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: One asterisk (*) denotes $0 in income related to educational or career pursuits. Two asterisks (**) denote $0 in income associated with being a stay-at-home mother or father. Three asterisks (***) denote that the income level varies; the respondent indicated on average the family income is approximately $3,000/month. Four asterisks (****) denote that the income was not reported on the demographic questionnaire.

All of the respondent’s husbands hold at least a bachelor’s degree. Consistent with prior research on educational attainment and earnings among Black married couples, on average, respondents in this study have more education and earn more than their husbands (Cooper 2016). Among nineteen married respondents, twelve have more education than their husbands. Four couples have identical or comparable levels of education. Three husbands have attained higher levels of education than their wives. It
is important to note that all of the respondents in this study are married to Black men, with the exception of Larissa, whose husband is white.

Four respondents are involved in marriages in which one spouse is the primary breadwinner for the family; in three of these marriages, husbands are the primary breadwinners. Among these three marriages, two couples have very young children and the respondents have assumed primary caregiving responsibilities. For one of these respondents, this arrangement is temporary, while she cares for her newborn child; for the other respondent, this arrangement has been in place for at least the last eight years. The third respondent is a full-time physician and in the process of building a medical practice; she is not currently drawing a salary. One respondent is the primary breadwinner for her family; her husband has assumed caregiving responsibilities for their children and supports her as she builds her business.

The average income for respondents who are employed is $99,017, which is well above the average for middle-class individuals in America. In 2015, individuals were middle class if they earned between $24,173 and $72,521 for individuals (Pew Research Center, 2015). For couples in which both partners are employed, ten out of nineteen respondents earn more than their husbands. The gaps in earnings between wives and their husbands are as large as 100k or as small as 3k annually. On average, the gap in earnings where respondents earn more than their husbands is approximately twenty-three thousand, six hundred dollars a year. Four respondents earn less than their
husbands. Among these respondents, not including stay-at-home mothers, the average income gap is approximately twenty thousand dollars. It is also important to note that respondents who were upwardly mobile had a heightened sensitivity to or vigilance about financial issues and perhaps more generalized uncertainty about their marital relationship.

5.6.8 Marital Expectations and Realities

Several respondents articulated a desire to find a partner who came from a “good” family, had similar levels of education, a solid, stable career, and possessed certain emotional characteristics such as kindness, compassion, sincerity, and humor. Several women had a very particular image of what kind of future partner they aspired to marry.

Kendra said, “I remember wanting to find a husband who was from a similar upbringing as me. Who was from a middle-class, upper-middle-class, who had like a comfortable family, his parents were together. And I remember kind of looking for that. I don’t remember how that got in my head, but that’s not what ended up happening. I thought a lot about money, finding a guy that I thought was gonna be on a good path.”

Despite Kendra’s aspirations for a partner with a similar family structure and socioeconomic background, her husband’s family of origin is actually quite different than what she envisioned. She went on to say that his family structure and financial
situation make her feel incredibly anxious, a reality that she has not fully communicated to her husband:

Yeah, he’s from, I don’t know how you would classify his [family’s] income class. They’re from Birmingham, Alabama. Parents are divorced. I think poor might not be right, but I really don’t know. I worry about we’ll have to support his mom. Yeah. So just like more complications, for sure….

When I asked Kendra whether or not her husband knows of her fears about having to financially support his mother at some point, given her precarious financial situation, she responded that he does, but “not super clearly.”

Part of Kendra’s anxiety or uneasiness about potentially having to contribute to her husband’s mother’s future care can be attributed to the reality that for most of their marital relationship, Kendra has had a more stable career than her husband, and she has shouldered most of the financial responsibility for their family. Despite the fact that Kendra and her husband have both completed graduate level education and have high earnings, upwards of $300,000 combined annually, Kendra feels uneasy over the potential support she and her husband may have to provide her mother-in-law. She says, “I’ve been the stable, not breadwinner, but kind of. And it’s been annoying, so we’re starting to talk about like I want those roles to shift or be open to shift, and that’s something that we’re trying to compromise and figuring out a lot lately.”

Kendra’s articulation of her expectations of her marriage partner confirms existing research that finds that Black middle-class women aspire to partner with men
who possess certain characteristics, including a stable family of origin and financial
stability and security that can anchor their combined class standing firmly in the middle
or upper-middle class. Moreover, her anxiety about having to provide support for her
mother-in-law is consistent with prior research on enduring Black American married
couples. Marks et al. (2008) examined the internal and external challenges faced by these
couples. They found that one of the most salient challenges was the stress associated
with providing support to extended-family members and fictive kin.

During the course of our conversation, Kendra mentioned that she is currently
spearheading saving for a down payment for the home they plan to purchase. Later, I
asked her what would happen if her husband lost his job or stopped working for a long
time. She replies:

That’d be depressing. I would really struggle with that. I don’t feel like he has
any more opportunities in this marriage right now. His phase of risk is over. So
no starting your own thing right now. It’s my turn. Losing your job, I could
probably rise to that occasion. But I would need to talk to my friends all the time.
He would need me to like make him feel good, but I would just be spiteful and
angry. That would be not good.

Later in our conversation, I ask Kendra how important her job is to her at this
point in her life and she says, “Working, having a job, but more so like purpose, is
extremely important to me. Maintaining something that’s my individual contribution is
important and with that, also I think it’s important for me to be financially independent-
ish if something went wrong.”
Although she desired a partner situated similarly to herself in terms of class background and family structure, Kendra has taken on the more traditional breadwinner role in her marriage. This is clearly a source of great concern for her as she thinks about the future with respect to her husband’s parents, specifically his mother’s financial situation, and her and her husband’s ability to purchase a home.

As a note, I analyzed differences between upwardly mobile and middle class married respondents to determine whether there was variation in their reports of marital expectations satisfaction or dissatisfaction. I found that upwardly mobile respondents pointed to specific events, emotions, or perceptions from their families of origin that influence how they think about and engage in their marital relationship. I use Vanessa as a case study to demonstrate this point.

5.6.9 Daddy Lessons: How Parental Relationships Influence Respondents’ Beliefs about Marriage

At one point during our almost two-hour-long interview in a small breakfast restaurant in New York City, Vanessa recalled a conversation she had with her then pastor about her beliefs about marriage. She had recently met a man at their church with whom she developed a romantic relationship. At the time of their conversation, he had asked for her hand in marriage. Initially reluctant about his proposal, Vanessa explains to her pastor that her fears and hesitancy about marriage were based, in part, on the challenges she witnessed in her parent’s marriage. Now, twelve years into her own
marriage, she is mindful of the emotional and psychological effort she continues to exert to remain grounded and content in her marriage. Referring to her conversation with her mentor and pastor about the proposal, Vanessa said:

She was like, well, what’s stopping you? There’s gotta be something stopping you. What’s stopping you? I said, my mother and my father had a horrible relationship, and I just don’t think I have it in me to be, I don’t think I’m marriage material. I don’t think I have it in me to be a good wife. She was like, you will not be [your parents], you are not your parents, you know. You’re not them and you’re not what you saw. That, I had, I remind myself of that daily, after 12 years. Well, not daily but when it gets hard, I remind myself, after 12 years, that no, I’m not... Maybe the first three, four years, I would escape to a scene I saw in my parents’ relationship cuz it’s automatic. And I thought I had to live by that. It would always get me in trouble. That’s exactly what, why I didn’t wanna get married. When I stopped doing that, that was really, you know, when I stopped going back, picking up, you know, going over those clips, and those sound bytes, and I could really deal with life differently. I would not have said, I wouldn’t say that I perfected it up to present day but it’s much better. My perception is much different, you know. There’s no such thing as a perfect marriage.

The decision to get married is not one that most people would take lightly. As such, Vanessa’s hesitancy is not necessarily surprising. The point that I make by using this exemplar is the fact that Vanessa directly associates her fear or reluctance to marry with the traumatic events she witnessed in her parents relationship. In fact, well into her marriage, Vanessa struggles to separate the reality of her marriage and the memories she has of her parent’s tumultuous relationships. Undoubtedly, this wrestling has compromised Vanessa’s overall contentment and happiness in her marriage. In the sections that follow, I elaborate more on Vanessa’s interview.
Throughout our interview, Vanessa shared vulnerable details about her marriage – the expectations, aspirations, hopes, dreams, fears, and anxieties associated with her romantic partnership, her journey to motherhood and how these realities challenged her notions of personal freedom and independence, her marital separation and the restoration of the relationship; and the ongoing struggles she and her husband experience as they navigate their individual emotional, psychological, material, and professional needs.

When I asked Vanessa to tell me how she felt about her marriage at the present moment, she responded:

Today? We’re doing great. We’re doing great. Meaning we’re so imperfect that we love it, you know. We do not know what we’re doing. I tell husband, I know that I don’t know what I’m doing. Let’s try this...

Later, during a part of our conversation that centered on their family’s financial arrangements, I asked Vanessa to tell me about how she felt about her husband being the primary breadwinner for her family. She said something that both surprised me and prompted me to think more critically about what contentment actually means to Black middle-class women. She responded:

That has been a struggle from day one. I don’t know if it’s a level of trust or just the way I’ve been taught, I’ve been so strong. Hey, I need to make sure I have something, just in case, because we’re both human, you know. You know, you get tired [of the marriage], you end it. You know, not that I see that but I’m a realist. When it comes to it, I’ve got three children and even if it was just myself, I’d still wanta provide for myself… even being in a marriage, I work now. Not as much as I’d like to because of the girls’ schedule … I have to leave space open to
do that because I would go on a rampage of, oh, I need to build my own career. I need to build my own dynasty.

Vanessa’s comments give voice to the tension she feels in depending on her husband for financial security and stability. Moreover, she expresses palpable anxiety that she should be prepared for the worst-case scenario in the event that her marriage ends. Consistent with the literatures on racial socialization and Black collective memory, Black daughters are taught by their mothers and grandmothers to be strong, independent, and self-reliant. On one hand, Vanessa characterizes her relationship as “great”, and on the other, she articulates that there is an underlying concern or fear that she ought to always be able to take care of herself and her children— even as a married woman. Likely, Vanessa’s internal conflict over her husband being the primary earner for her family is associated with a number of factors including the lessons she learned from her parents relationship during her childhood and adolescence and her cognizance that her marriage could end sometime in the future.

Moreover, there are some slight differences between expectations and realities among married Black women from different class backgrounds— upwardly mobile and middle class. Findings presented in this study confirms prior research that finds that upwardly mobile Blacks have to negotiate complex cultural and class values when they attain middle class standing (Hill 2004). In this instance, the cultural and class values relate directly to their perceptions and evaluations of their marriages.
5.6.10 Residue from One’s Family of Origin

A distinct pattern emerged among upwardly mobile, now middle class women. This particular pattern could be associated with “learning from experience” or it could be carrying over fear, anxiety, and trauma from one’s childhood and adolescence into their adult marital relationships. There is a sense that some women are drawing on experiences from their childhoods and experiences in their families of origin. These lessons or experiences are influencing how women engage, think, about and act in their marriages.

This is not to say that other respondent’s experiences could not be related to experiences from childhood or adolescence. Rather, these are instances in which respondents explicitly make a connection between an issue that negatively impacts their contentment or happiness in their marriage to an experience or observation they made in their family of origin.

Similar to Vanessa, Shannon thinks about and interprets the interactions she has with her now husband in opposition to the experiences she witnessed in her family of origin with her mother. When I asked her what she thinks it would take for her and her husband to have a long-lasting marriage, Shannon responds by telling me a story about a conversation she and her husband had with their premarital counselor. She recalls:

And the last [therapy] session, [the therapist said] Shannon, you need to recognize that a lot of the issues that you have with Ian stem from fear and not so much Ian. Meaning that if I see that within the first two months of Ian and I
living together, that instead of him initiating a date night, instead of him remembering to include me on events with his orientation, instead of him taking the initiative to clean the house after he’s seen me do it for consecutive weeks and he didn’t bother to do anything, it’s from a fear of having a lifetime of that… I saw my mother do that for a lifetime and I didn’t get married to live the life my mother lived... And for me, that is my greatest fear is being a married single woman. That is my [fear of], being a married single parent...And I won’t do it alone. I won’t be married, doing it alone.

Unlike Shannon, who actually knew she wanted to get married and have her own family, Janice’s observations of her parents marriage actually made her feel hesitant about marriage. She said:

When I was younger, I actually believed well into my early 20s that I would never get married and it was mainly because I observed what felt like a very dysfunctional relationship between my parents ... They were married 40 years and since my mom was 25... They, they ascribed to stereotypical gender roles and it’s just, it was always this feeling growing up of like I don’t want my relationship to be like this. And because that was kinda my only example of marriage, I really thought that’s what marriage was and that’s why I wasn’t interested in it.

Like Vanessa, Leah explains how and why it was so important to her to have financial resources on hand in case something ever happened in her relationship with her husband:

LesLeigh: Okay. Let’s talk a little bit about, I have like a few thoughts in my head. So one is, let’s talk a little bit about finances. So like when you got married, did you and Mike have any like clear expectations of how you would manage your money in the household, how you would divide bills? What was your strategy?

Leah: So we were, we have one account. And when we got married, I was still in school so he was the only one working but I had, you know, access to that money and, but he wanted me to like physically pay the bills. So he wanted to know
how much stuff was but like physically, I would pay the bills. I had a side bank account that first year he didn’t know about. My mother would give me money. But it caused a problem because something happened and we like needed some money. It was a significant amount of money and I had it and so I gave the money and he’s like, so how is it that... when stuff happens, you keep having money? Where are you getting this money from? And I think I like said my mother but he like kept digging and I finally said that I had this bank account. And he said, he felt like I was preparing to like leave him, preparing for a rainy day. Now, my mother did tell me that was what the account was for. But he didn’t like it and he said that I was like, it felt like I wasn’t all the way in because I still had this rainy day fund.

Later in our discussion of how she and her husband came to an agreement on and currently managed their family’s finances,

LesLeigh: Okay. Okay. In your mind, was it important to marry someone who you thought of as a provider?

Leah: Oh, yes. Uh huh.

LesLeigh: Okay. And why is that the case?

Leah: My father was a provider. He always had a job... So, like in the back of my head was what happened to her is never gonna happen to me, because my mother didn’t work. She didn’t and then she developed a muscle disease where she couldn’t work. And so when she got divorced, like there was a point where we were homeless and so all of that was like in my head, that’s not gonna be me. And I could provide for me and the girls if need be.

For Trystin, she said, “I feel like in our family.... We were like our own individual planets, sort of like I don’t feel like there was much connection between any of us...”. In response to what Trystin describes as her family’s emotional distance and detached interactional style, early in her marriage Trystin and her husband established the expectation that she and her husband would make decisions in the best interest of
their family unit, to prioritize communication and closeness, and to be supportive of each other personally and professionally. In all, upwardly mobile respondents are more keenly aware of and vigilant about their financial and emotional security in their marital relationships as compared to respondents who were raised in firmly middle class families.

Terry, also an upwardly mobile respondent, is a very financially conscious woman. One of the most significant stressors in her relationship is the amount of financial sacrifice she has made in her marriage to this point. Prior to her marriage, her husband owned a home. Now, the couple is financially responsible for that property along with the one they currently reside in. Regarding this financial responsibility, we have the following exchange:

So just with the issues with Justin and his house, in terms of compromise, like that has compromised my finances so I, the money is there but in terms of doing extra things, it just, I’m compromising and intentionally not doing them so there is a pot of money that we have, you know, if we need to keep drawing from it. So in that way, I feel like I’m compromising. I probably would have preferred to not teach this summer but there’s no, that money would be very helpful for us. Again, we won’t be asking to borrow money at all, but I’m a person who likes to have a huge safety net. So that helps us to get to a safety net. It’s a compromise because part of me would really prefer to not be teaching this summer. Because this is our first year of being married. I’ve had to make some financial sacrifices and compromises that if I were alone, if it were just me, I would not have had to make.

I asked Terry, “How do you feel about these compromises?” and she responded:

Very stressed. Very stressed. There are days where I try to convince myself that it
is okay, and sometimes I lash out at him, and I have said things like, ‘It’s because of you. If it weren’t for you and this stupid situation, we wouldn’t...’ But it’s just because it gets bottled up. So I do feel very stressed out about it because I think about it, it’s like at the point where I feel like, okay. I’m confident about potentially having children, and I’m approaching forty, and maybe we will think about getting a house at some point. At that point, where I’m trying to be excited about those things, it’s like, But where’s the money for that? There is no[ne], and we’re not able to plan for that right now. So that makes me feel very fearful and stressed out at the same time. Like, you know, how are we gonna plan for all these things when our finances are tied up?

Terry has taken very careful steps to secure her financial future, and for her, getting married actually compromised her financial situation—so much so, that she has taken on additional responsibilities at the university where she works. While the financial stress associated with her husband’s home is one part of the dissatisfaction she currently feels, a second aspect of this stress is associated with Terry’s ability to plan for the future. In addition to planning to grow their family, the couple is also planning to buy a home of their own. These financial stresses are something that weigh heavily on Terry. She is not alone in experiencing the stress associated with money and marriage.

Shannon, a recently married respondent who lives in New York City, has very strong feelings about the stress she experiences in her marriage as it relates to financial matters. When I asked Shannon to tell me a bit about how she and her husband approach finances in their marriage, she responded, “We should pour a drink.” After getting more comfortable, Shannon carefully explained, “This is still evolving and I’m trying to seek advice from those who have successfully done this... I don’t know if this
is the fear in me, but I feel like as a woman, I should always have a little bit of my own. And I came into this with my own.” This particular point, of having financial resources of her own in the event something happened or went wrong in her marriage, was echoed by eight married respondents.

After explaining to me how she and her husband manage their household finances, Shannon articulated her frustration with her husband’s approach to managing money. Specifically, she is uncomfortable with his approach to managing credit card debt. She says, “I’m one where, at the end of the month, you pay off your bills. Preston probably carries forward. That’s an issue for me. If you’re carrying over, and an emergency situation hasn’t occurred, or you don’t have a plan for paying off what is carrying over within three months, then you are living beyond your means and I don’t feel comfortable living beyond your means.”

Throughout the discussion of how Shannon and her husband manage money, it is apparent that they have drastically different approaches, and this creates dissatisfaction for her. She explains one frustration over their budget: “I would say it’s challenging for me to be like, Why would you get that many Ubers this month? That’s dumb. You went over the allotted line for the Uber budget. Why do we make the budget if you’re not gonna follow the budget? I’m that person. But it’s also because funds are limited. And so it’ll be interesting to see how things change in the next year.” Both Terry
and Shannon express a strong desire for things to change in the immediate future with respect to how money is managed and allocated in their marriages.

Janice explained that she and her husband “have come a long way” with respect to coming to an agreement on how to approach financial matters as a couple. At the time of our interview, she describes the management of financial matters in her marriage as a work in progress. After explaining how she and her husband manage short- and long-term debt, credit cards, and paying bills, Janice says that she and her husband have very different approaches to money:

When we first met with this financial planner and we were talking about saving, Anderson had an absolute meltdown. Like I’m frugal, I’m the saver and he’s the spender. And I like to have experiences and he likes to have things … I think what our marriage counselor encouraged to do was just not judge the other person and just acknowledge we have different values, and so he, I think we both tried to see the other person’s side. I mean, there was definitely a point in time where Anderson would come home with some gym shoes and it would be a full-out argument and at the end of the day, he was like, But I paid all the bills, right? And technically, this is coming out of my discretionary money, right? So, What’s your issue? And even though I hate that he buys a gabilion shoes, I really couldn’t, I don’t feel like I had a leg to stand on. Like well, hell, he put his money in the savings. He paid the bills. At the end of the day, in the same way that if I wanta go get my nails done and choose to spend my money that way, if he gets these shoes, I don’t really know if I have an argument. So it’s definitely been a conversation that I think we’ve grown in and have gotten better but are absolutely still figuring things out.

Again, for Shannon, Terry, and Janice, how finances are managed and allocated continues to be a work in progress in their marriages. Like Shannon and Kendra, Vanessa expresses some concern over the tension she feels between having her own
money, in case something happens in their marriage, and her husband being the primary breadwinner in their relationship.

Vanessa nervously explained:

I have struggled with, cuz my mother has, oh my god, I had two sisters and she really poured into us, work hard, provide for yourself. If you want something, you get it, you know. So, I’ve been working since I was a child. I always had some kind of business, making pillows or doing something, cutting grass. I’ve always had some kind of gig. And sometimes, it does get to me. I think that’s something I’ll always grapple with. I don’t think that’s something that’ll go away and I don’t even want it to go away. I don’t never want to get settled in, hey, My husband is the breadwinner. Just relax. I never want to relax in that way. Because everything, as my mother taught me, *everything* is subject to change. You know, I can control my part on, hey, I’m gonna stick in it, not quit. Just because it’s a lot of work but what if he one day says, I’m done. You know, of course, I’d get his half, but I’m still gonna work, you know. I’m still going to live. I’m still going to do what I need to do for my children.

There are several ways to interpret Shannon, Vanessa, and other respondents’ desire to have their own financial resources. In a pragmatic sense, more than fifty percent of marriages in the United States end in divorce, and the rate of divorce is even higher among Black couples. There is some indication, however, that the later individuals get married, the more enduring those marriages tend to be. Undoubtedly, all of the respondents in this study are aware of the likelihood of marital separation and divorce. In the event of a separation or breakdown in the marital relationships, it is rational that these respondents would want to have the finances to take care of themselves and their children. At the same time, six of these respondents were raised in upwardly mobile families. It is possible that the effort that they put forth in order to
achieve their educational, career, and familial aspirations and current class standing are in some ways distinct from that of respondents who were raised in firmly middle-class families. Moreover, for them, this “achieved” class standing may be different from that of their middle-class counterparts who were born into middle-class families. The anxiety or apprehension associated with downward mobility may be a bit more real for them, as this is a context that they have more experience with. Third, for some women like Vanessa, their mothers give them very specific advice about not only taking care of or providing for themselves, but also about having their own financial resources in the event that their marriages break down. For women who are not upwardly mobile, the financial considerations in marriage exist, but they are distinct from firmly middle class women.

5.6.11 Financial Security Among Middle Class Respondents

Valerie, a middle class stable respondent, seriously considered financial security and fiscal responsibility before she married her husband, and her financial principles factor prominently into her beliefs about happiness in marriage. Confidently, she recalled:

We had a lot of conversations about money before we decided that marriage was something that we could do. I am very, very, very particular about my money… And I have been financially responsible for myself for a very long time, and that has helped me to make certain decisions financially. I have saved very well for as long as I have been working… Even the tax thing I keep bringing up. Like it’s annoying as hell, because it is his primary [responsibility], because we filed
together this year. And he has to pay back taxes. And the amount that I was supposed to get back, I am not getting that back. I'm putting it towards his situation so that he can cover it... I am essentially giving him my return, and he is aware of that. But, like, I'm just not here for it. [laughs] OK. So it is just important to me. And money should never be a thing that we even have to talk about. I mean, I don't like to talk about it...

While Valerie and her now husband had significant dialogue about her beliefs about money and how much of a priority financial responsibility is for her, she admits that he owed back taxes and she used her return to pay them off. While she made the choice to do this to benefit her husband, she acknowledges that she is not pleased with the reality that she had to do this. In a separate section of the interview, she reveals that her husband had substantial debt before they got married, and before she would accept a ring from him, she asked him to provide documentation of the amounts of all of the debts he owed and his plan to pay off the balances.

Even though Kendra, Vanessa, Terry, Janice, Shannon, and Valerie all have different experiences with respect to finances and economic security in their marriages, each of these women describe the efforts that they put forth to establish financial security for themselves prior to getting married, and express serious concerns over their need to feel financially secure and stable in their marriages. While some respondents express concern over their husband’s spending habits, others express frustration over the ways that their partner’s financial debts or obligations compromise their ability to save in the same ways they did when they were single. Other respondents express some
concern or anxiety over “having their own” in the event that something goes wrong in their marriage. Financial security and stability, along with continued financial growth, is a significant priority, and in several cases the lack of it is a source of dissatisfaction for married respondents.

5.6.12 The Demands of Balancing Career and Motherhood

Consistent with recent research on middle-class Black women, many Black middle-class career women recalibrate their professional expectations and trajectories in light of motherhood. Specifically, I found evidence of what Barnes (2016) calls strategic mothering among my respondents. According to Barnes (2016), strategic mothering is a framework that is designed to “account for the myriad ways in which Black mothers continuously navigate and redefine their relationship with work to best fit the needs of their families and their communities.” Most of the respondents who hold advanced degrees were on a professional trajectory that could have led to careers as upper-level managers, partners, or chief executive officers in their organizations. Instead of trying to “do it all” and “have it all,” these women instead seek to create professional arrangements that give them increased flexibility and more time to focus on their families. Some report adjusting their professional goals in light of motherhood, while others describe taking on or pursuing different kinds of professional opportunities that give them the time and flexibility to spend more time with their children. At the same
time, for many of these respondents, their professional lives remain incredibly important to them individually, and as mothers. Some report that they want their children to see them as career women.

I first became attentive to shifts in respondents’ career priorities after my conversation with Summer, a mother of two young children:

LesLeigh: You used the word busy to describe things. What makes your life busy?

Summer: I have two small kids. My husband is a consultant, so he travels for work. Usually, two to three days out of the week and then even when he’s here, traffic being what it is, he’s gone early in the morning, gets home late at night. And I work full time.

LesLeigh: How has being a mom changed your professional life? Or has it changed it at all?

Summer: I just went back to diversity recruiting. So [people say] Do you think there’s a lot of opportunity at your company? Do you see yourself climbing a ladder, blah, blah, blah and I was like, honestly, right now, because I have a young family and my husband travels for work, I’m stuck with that. Like nobody’s leaning in right now because somebody has to be home. So definitely right now, like okay, it really works for my family that I work from home, so what I need to do is perform well in this position but make it clear that I’m looking to stay here for a while. You know, maybe in a couple years, that will change, but right now there are no ladders being climbed. So yeah, sometimes you need to take a step back.

While Summer holds an MBA from a prestigious business school and is qualified for a number of positions, she has made the decision to focus on her children while they are young. It is important, however, to note the language that Summer uses to describe this choice. She says that she is “stuck” with the arrangement. In other words, her
husband’s position as a consultant requires that he travel for work, and as a consequence, Summer’s options are somewhat limited in terms of the kinds of work that she can take on while her children are relatively young.

Rachel, an advertising tech manager and mother of two children under three years old, described the challenges associated with maintaining a full-time career, focusing on a burgeoning entrepreneurial endeavor, and prioritizing her marriage and children. She said:

I’m just trying to keep it together. If I could document my day, down to the minute, it is insane… I changed a poopy diaper in the backseat of a sedan with two installed car seats today and like, eh, whatever… And then when I go to work, I walk in and they’re like Rachel, you look so good and refreshed today, and I’m like do I really? Cuz I feel like a bag of bolts. Like I’m not together. I’m a mess. I have bags under my eyes, just trying to maintain. It helps me to maintain a surface, like a façade of togetherness, because I end up internalizing it and feeling like I can do this, this, this, this and that. Sometimes it comes to a head and I have moments where I’m like, I need a motherfucking break, but I try and just be positive, keep it together as much as possible.

Specifically, with respect to her marriage, motherhood, and balancing work, Rachel recalled:

I think back to like what it was like before we had kids. We had a ton of fun. We traveled. We hung out with our friends without kids. And having kids is great and it’s fun. It’s just a different kind of fun. And you have to work twice as hard to nurture your relationship. To give each other attention… When we come home, we both get off around five, after we pick up the kids, get home around six, I go and I feel like it’s my second shift, basically. I have three shifts in the day. I have my nine-to-five work shift, I have my six-to-nine-ish mom, family time, and then I have the ten-to-whenever work time… I feel like I’m go, go, go, go, go. Like it is bam, bam, bam, bam, bam because we have to get home, get the stuff unpacked from the day. Get dinner cooked. Get the kitchen cleaned up.
Play with the kids and everything is almost planned to the minute. And it’s so easy if you’re not conscious of it, to let your relationship slide. It just is. It just doesn’t get the same attention. It’s a constant, constant struggle to pay attention to the other person. How was your day? What are you going through at work? What are you working on? All that stuff.

Rachel admits that she has to be conscious of her interactions with her husband so as to not make him feel like he is unimportant in her life. She emphasizes that she has a supportive husband and that he’s “an amazing father,” but at this point in her life, she is stretched thin with her work and family responsibilities.

For Faith, I asked her to tell me a bit about how she manages life as a woman, mother, wife, and research scientist. I find that not only have her professional priorities changed, but she is also conscientious about the impression that her role as a career-woman gives her son.

LesLeigh: How would you say that your life has changed since you became a mom? Or has it changed?

Faith: No, it’s completely changed. Nothing else matters. I don’t care about this work. Like you’re gonna get these formulas, this is the best I can do. I don’t know what else to tell you. Like I’ll have them for you. And I mean, obviously, it’s my job. I care about my career, but as far as me being super invested… I remember before this batch was going wrong and I’m in tears, like crying over fricking shampoo. No more. If it’s not about my son, sorry. Nope, I can’t stay late. Gotta go home to my baby. So like nothing else matters.

LesLeigh: How would you describe or characterize your parenting styles with Xavier? How do you and your husband manage your responsibilities for your son?

Faith: I am more lax than Brian is. I do the lion’s share of taking care of Xavier. And that’s just how our roles have fallen into place. If I ask Brian to do
something, I know that he’ll do it. But sometimes he has to be reminded. But I know that I can absolutely depend on him to do something. Although I’m very particular about how I like things done, and sometimes we don’t see eye to eye on that part. He definitely will help when I need help.

LesLeigh: Does that feel like a compromise or a sacrifice to you?

Faith: No. Like Xavier is way more important to me than anything really. So you know, I feel like I’ve accomplished a lot. I want to move up [at work], but I don’t want to have so much responsibility that it would take away from him. Like, I don’t want to run a lab and have to be at work for thirteen hours a day, because I’m trying to become the president of the company. That doesn’t matter to me anymore. I’m perfectly happy being on the bench, which means I would never take the managerial side of the ladder. And just be like a senior chemist. Despite their significant academic and professional accomplishments, Summer, Faith, and Rachel express that they have significant responsibilities in terms of caregiving for their families. Summer said she recently became very frustrated by her husband’s request for a particular meal for dinner after being away for a week, and Faith expressed that between herself and her husband, she bears most of the responsibilities for caring for their young son.

Echoing Faith’s sentiments, Anastasia expressed that her professional goals changed once she had her daughter. At the start of the interview, I asked her how she was doing and how things had been going lately. Immediately she responded:

I’m fine… Life has been super busy for me. Both career-wise and family-wise. On the career end, I’m in the midst of a shift professionally. I’m considering going into private practice. Which is challenging and scary at the same time. But the motivation for me doing that is because I’m a mom, and I have reached a point in my career where I don’t like for someone else to dictate to me my time, because it started to cut into the time that I spent with my family, and I actually like them. [laughs] So I don’t use my career as an escape hatch… I went from being a
newlywed-ish wife to a mom, and that shift to being a mom consumes maybe seventy percent of my time now… It has been very, very busy.

Later in our interview, I asked Anastasia how being a mother has influenced her professional life and aspirations. She shared:

There was nothing I would not do for my job, because nothing was important as what I did. That’s who I was. But the moment literally the first time I held her… nothing [else] mattered, nothing. I couldn’t care less if that building burned down to the ground… I started to care less about that [work] as much as I care about my child. So I’ve had to make a lot of reevaluations about what that means. For me moments like bath time are important, and being present for her is important.

She went on to say:

I want her to remember seeing me at her dance recitals or her going to ‘Muffins with Mom’ at school and stuff like that. I don’t want to be just the provider. I want to be a parent. And so, to that end, motherhood has impacted my decision making and my priorities for my career. So much so that I’m trying to figure out ways to which I can still function and do what I need to do. But on my terms, so that I can be there for her. And my job doesn’t mean that much to me, to where I’m willing to sacrifice that for her.

While Faith, Anastasia, Rachel, and Summer are employed full-time and balance the sometimes gendered responsibilities associated with childrearing, two stay-at-home mothers in the study echoed their sentiments in talking about their decision to become stay-at-home mothers. Both respondents communicated that their careers have become deprioritized since having their children.

Vanessa, who is a stay-at-home mother to three daughters, explained:

As far as my career, it’s kind of not a priority right now. Because of the girls’ ages, I really want to impart into them, give them a strong foundation from my
end and for the family. I know my husband’s traveling right now, so I don’t want a nanny to raise our children. It defeats the purpose, you know. What am I working for? What am I trying to prove? They need love right now. They need me to be there, cuz I can be. Some women can’t be there at this age, so since I’ve been privileged to do that, I’m gonna do that. That’s my choice.

Faye, who is an event planner, talked to me about her feelings as a new mother and how motherhood has influenced her professional life. We had the following exchange:

Faye: I do stuff that I’m good at. If I’m not good at something, I stop doing it. This [motherhood] is something that I didn’t feel like I was good at and had to do twenty-four hours a day. That was super challenging to constantly keep trying, even though I felt like a failure. Being a first-time mom is unreal. Hard, like people use the word hard, because it’s the easiest word to come up with, but in reality it’s all-consuming. It really is. It takes every ounce of your time, attention, and brainpower.

LesLeigh: How has, or how do you envision being a mother impacting your professional life?

Faye: The event-planning part of my work would require me to get childcare. Because I’m a freelancer, I can’t necessarily afford full-time childcare. I need to get a full-time job to afford full-time childcare. And I don’t know. Like I just had someone reach out to me about an event, a month-long gig starting next week, and it’s cool, like I want to take it. But I don’t know what I would do with [my son]. So I’m having this back and forth, this existential crisis. I don’t know. I’ve never seen myself as a stay-at-home mom. I don’t think I would be good at it because I know me. [laughs] At some point I’m going to have to go back to work. I just have to figure it out when it happens. I did do an event, just two weeks ago, just to test the waters to see how it felt. As far as the work goes it was fine. I was fine. I wasn’t like crying in the corner or anything. What was surprising to me was when I came home, I didn’t like that I only got like two hours with them at the end of the day. I can’t imagine only getting that little bit of time with him… In reality, women do it all the time. They have kids and they go back to work… I’m definitely going to work and do something. I think that it is important to show him that you are not just one thing. You don’t have to be everything either… And especially for a little boy, I want him to see a strong woman.
Like Faye, Faith articulates a desire for her son to see her as a well-educated, professional woman, and, like Anastasia, she communicates an unwillingness to spend as much time at work as she once did. Instead, she prefers to spend this time at home with her son.

I want my son to be proud to tell somebody what I do. Before my mom really started her career, maybe two or three years ago, she worked at a convalescent home. She was a CNA, and I was always embarrassed to tell people what my mother did. That is flawed, now looking back at it, but, you know, I [was] a kid. And I’m like, other people can say my mom does this, or my mom’s a doctor, or my mom’s a nurse, or my mom’s a lawyer, or blah, blah, blah, blah and I’m like, well, I don’t wanna tell people my mom works in a convalescent home. So I used to lie and say she was a nurse, even before she was a nurse. But in that same sense, I feel proud that my son can be proud about what I do. My job is cool. So he can be like, Oh, yeah, my mom’s a research scientist. Before, I was like, Oh, maybe I’ll go back to school and get a PhD, or I want to have my own line of products. I don’t have those big aspirations anymore, because I know that those things would take more of my time, and I would rather spend that time with Xavier.

Partly as a result of her own experiences as a child, and her mother’s professional journey, Faith is committed to her professional life and values her son seeing her as a professional woman. However, she articulates that she has taken a step back from career aspirations or trajectories that could compromise the amount of time that she is able to spend with her son.

For Camille, who at the time of the interview was expecting her third child, becoming a mother significantly changed her professional priorities. After earning a master’s degree in counseling and considering attending law school, she and her
husband started their family. Dissatisfied with the quality of the public and charter schools in her area, she started homeschooling her children, and later decided to build her own business. Camille calmly explained:

I don’t want to take anything from my mother, because she did a good job. But now that I’m a mother, I see that childhood is so fleeting and those relationships, those moments, sitting down and knitting with them, taking them to practice, riding bikes—that matters a lot more than a title. Being a big-time lawyer or whatever you want to call yourself… My mother hates that I stay at home. ‘How could you? You’ve wasted all of this tuition money.’ And I’m just like, Isn’t this what you’re supposed to do?... I never thought I would stay at home. I thought I would have a career and do all of these things.

Larissa noted that her challenges with balancing work and motherhood did not start after her son was born. Rather, they began while she was pregnant, and she continued to experience the conflicts and tensions as she transitioned back into her professional role after maternity leave:

You’re different pregnant. I still worked long weeks for long hours… It was hard to feel professional. I mean, when you gain sixty pounds in a few months, [and] you’re still trying to go into meetings... These are things men will never know… So now I’m finally back… It’s like trying to hide the fact that having a child absolutely affects your work and trying to make it seem like nothing.

All of the working mothers in this study express a sincere desire to be present, engaged, and involved in their children’s lives, and—at the same time—maintain and grow their professional lives using one of the following two strategies, or a combination.

First, one group of respondents, including Faith, have decided to downshift their professional aspirations, trajectories, and—in some cases—the time they invest into
fulfilling their day-to-day professional responsibilities, in order to spend more time focusing on their children. These respondents make no mention, however, of their husbands making similar professional compromises or sacrifices.

Second, other respondents have changed their approach to the notion of work-life balance. Instead of trying to find ways in which they can create more time for their families in the existing frameworks of their professional jobs, career-minded women like Anastasia and Rachel have elected to pursue entrepreneurial endeavors that could potentially give them flexible work schedules that will allow them to spend time with their families.

For Vanessa, Faye, and other stay-at-home mothers, they have what one respondent called the “privilege” of focusing their energy solely on motherhood while their children are young. Despite their significant career and professional accomplishments to date, this subset of women elected to completely withdraw from the full-time workforce in order to nurture their children.

While motherhood is deeply rewarding and satisfying for many respondents, it is clear from their characterizations of their responsibilities at home and in their families that Black middle-class career women are still “the first line of defense,” as Rachel put it, with respect to childrearing and household responsibilities. This is not to say that their husbands are not actively involved in their children’s lives—in fact, two respondents make it a point to say that their husbands are “great fathers.” Rather, consistent with
research on white married middle-class women, the respondents in this study express that their day-to-day—and in some cases minute-to-minute—responsibilities involving their children exceed that of their husbands (Hochshild 1997; Hochschild & Machung 2012). In some instances, these realities can leave them feeling like they are “burning the candle at too many ends,” as one respondent put it. In sum, Black middle-class women, though generally very satisfied and content in their marriages, experience some stress associated with the demands of trying to maintain their professional and personal lives.

In terms of gendered expectations in marriages involving Black men and Black women, several respondents express that they are not only the first line of defense in terms of childrearing, but in several instances among married women in this study, they are also higher earners than their husbands. This finding is consistent with historical research on the role of Black women in families involving children (Collins 2005). Even though Black men provide more assistance in the home with respect to household chores and childrearing responsibilities relative to white men (Orbuch & Eyster 1997; Erickson 2005), Black women continue to shoulder more of the managing, organizing, and keeping up with the day-to-day responsibilities of the family. This can be a source of stress or dissatisfaction for married respondents.
5.6.13 Personal Sacrifices for the Good of the Family

In any relationship, there are compromises and trade-offs. Marriage is, of course, no different. Too much compromise, however, can contribute to feelings of dissatisfaction among respondents. In this section, I elaborate on the kinds of personal compromises and sacrifices that they reported making for the benefit of their families. Some respondents reported wanting more “me time,” and others expressed that there were certain goals or life experiences that they had compromised for the well-being of their families.

Camille lived and worked internationally prior to marrying her husband. Several times during the course of our interview, she mentions experiences that she had in Europe and in Africa. Not surprisingly, when I asked her to describe a significant compromise that she made in her marriage, it was relative to the freedom to travel. Emphatically, Camille said:

One thing I’ve always wanted to do is travel. My father lived all over the world, and I really wanted to do that. And with these kids, that ain’t happening. We don’t go anywhere. Sometimes when I see people doing that, I’m like, Oh my gosh! Like, they’re in Machu Picchu. I really wish I could be doing that right now... But I have a happy life. I don’t want to question where I’m at. But I’m just wishing things or wanting things.

While it is clear that Camille would not trade her marriage or her family for the opportunity to travel and see the world, it is also clear that this tradeoff is a significant
one for her. I asked Rachel whether she felt that she has had to make any compromises or hard decisions in her relationship. She said the following:

More since we’ve had kids. But there’s plenty of stuff that I want to do, or places I want to go that I don’t. All the time. I want to go get a massage. Nope, don’t go get a massage because you have family commitments. There’s been plenty of stuff. And it’s mostly in how I spend my time and my money.

She continued:

I don’t get to save as much as I used to, because I have to contribute more to bills because our bills are higher because we have kids. Yeah, I make sacrifices all the time, every day. Every hour. And I get tired of it sometimes, I do. But I also feel like it’s not forever… [My husband] is a very good parent. I will say that. And when he can take them, he does, but moms always have top billing. Moms always are the first line of defense. And always, from what I’ve seen, [they] will always make the most sacrifices for the children and for the family and for the relationships. Always. So I do it. I just get tired of it sometimes.

Rachel expresses a clear need or desire for more personal time. This sentiment rang true for Summer as well. When I asked her how things have been going for her lately, she replied:

Good. A little frazzled today. Lately, I’ve been like normal, busy. Just busy, busy. I was supposed to go on a girls’ weekend; it didn’t happen because of a tropical storm. I was pretty disappointed about that, but I don’t think I’ll have time to move away from my life for a minute. Now what I’m trying to figure out is things I can do on my own, that kind of fill that gap for me. [I] feel depleted. So I’m gonna try to figure that out right now… It definitely makes you more aware of how little time that you feel like you can spend on yourself. Which is the process I’m going through now. How do I fit in that me time? Cuz he feels—like at first, he was really kind of upset that I wanted to go on this girls’ trip because I [seemed] so excited about it. You just wanta escape. And I was like, no offense, but I do. I was like, I have to get out of here. That’s not, you know…I love you, guys. You are awesome. This is literally exactly what I wanted out of life. I wanted to be married. This is what I wanted. But it’s a lot, and I work from
home, and so at some point, yes, I have to get out of these four walls and it’s not a reflection on you. It’s not a reflection on our relationship. But you know, at some point, I have to, I need to not be needed by anyone. I think it’ll make me better when we’re together, if I’m refreshed and feeling my best.

In the section on happiness, I asked Kendra to describe what it would mean for her to experience long-term contentment or happiness in her marriage. She said that it would be good for her to have a version of “the American Dream”:

For me, it’s this compromise. Like I feel like I love doing whatever I want to do. But [my husband] gets so mad if there’s dishes in the sink. I have to listen to him. Another part of it is decisions. I think, Do you want to have a kid? Okay, then we need to go down this path of random decisions that we just feel differently about, every step of the way. It’s so much harder to move forward in some ways because you have this other person who’s so different from you influencing your thinking, your decisions—which is painful. Keeping up the sense of fun. Like not just turning into roommates. If you really want to keep some excitement alive, you have to actually think about it, and it’s just like, endless things. It’s like a project, that if you really want to thrive, you just have to think about and work on all the time.

LesLeigh: What about the American Dream, as you describe it, might you resent later?

Kendra: I just feel like I’ll be beholden to mortgages and kids’ play dates, and that sounds not interesting or fun to me as a human, as Kendra, and I don’t want to sacrifice my individuality, which has been so important to me, for the sake of a family. And so starting a family has always been a question mark. I think that it’s something that we’ve decided we’re gonna try, but I still feel like I’m resisting it. So I’m gonna just need to force my individuality within this little framework, I think.

While Kendra aspires to aspects of the American Dream, including home ownership, a comfortable middle-class lifestyle, and possibly children, she does not want these things at the expense of her own individuality. She does not want to be
beholden to convention. Instead, she wants to create a space where she can fully and completely maintain her sense of self and the things she aspires to in life.

As is the case with marital happiness and satisfaction, there is no one-size-fits-all cause of respondents’ marital dissatisfaction. Instead, I presented three themes that emerged from the data that correspond to various issues that women raised that spoke directly to their concerns, anxiety, frustration, or dissatisfaction.

5.7 Discussion and Conclusion

According to Coontz (2016) and Finkel (2014), modern marriages should include an element of or aspiration toward a soul mate quality. In other words, if their conceptions of modern marriages prevail among middle class Black women, the desire for or realization of a modern marriage characterized by a deeply fulfilling, emotionally satisfying relationship should exist. I found that this was not the case for Black middle-class women. Certainly, for some respondents, marriage is a mostly positive, affirming relational arrangement through which they find a great deal of personal and relational satisfaction. And for one or two married women, there is a sense that they were “made” for her husbands and their husbands are in fact their soul mates. And while there this some sense of emotional fulfillment among respondents, for the vast majority of Black middle-class women, there is no mention of their partners fulfilling their deepest emotional needs or helping them achieve their deepest sense of self, nor do they
mention this as an expectations of their marital relationships. In fact, some respondents experience ongoing anxiety and internal emotional conflict involving financial matters, the demands associated with career and motherhood, and a deep desire for autonomy and independence. Even for accomplished, well-educated Black women, the marital experience, and the satisfaction and fulfillment derived from it, can be full of twists and turns. I examined what satisfaction and contentment means to progressive, college-educated, middle-class Black women, and what processes are involved in achieving the versions of happiness that respondents describe and process during our conversations. Moreover, I closely examined the sites of tension or dissatisfaction that are common among middle-class Black women.

For most married respondents in this study, their husbands and marriages are a source of stability, safety, security, and support, and these women seem content in their relationships. However, this happiness and contentment takes different shapes for different women. Alongside it, they express concerns about matters that compromise their marital happiness, or could potentially compromise their relational satisfaction in the future. Specifically, three important themes emerged in this study of Black middle-class women and their marriages, including concerns over financial stability and security, balancing familial and professional responsibilities and aspirations, and the need for autonomy and independence.
Of the nineteen respondents in this study who are married, all of them expressed a sense of contentment, satisfaction, or happiness about the overall state or condition of their marriages. I was heartened to know that so many highly intelligent, hardworking middle-class Black women had transitioned from the relational uncertainty and unpredictability of singlehood to the stability of marriage. For some respondents, however, underlying the satisfaction and stability of their marriage unions, there was an unmistakable tenuousness, or a sense that their romantic relationships required consistent effort, attentiveness, negotiation, and—in some cases—“hard work.” It was interesting to learn from respondents that along with the joys and satisfaction of marriage came a new set of uncertainties, tensions, complexities, fears, and anxieties.

In particular, I drew out the persistence of concerns over finances and economic stability and security, the difficulty associated with balancing family life and professional responsibilities, and the desire for personal freedom and autonomy. In addition, for several upwardly mobile respondents in this study, their satisfaction associated with marriage does not simply center on the positive, desirable aspects. Even among respondents who report being generally happy and content in their marriages, marriage itself is not a leisurely, effortless experience.

In the end, respondents are not only involved in a dyadic relationship with their husbands—their new families often involve children, in-laws, siblings, and—in some cases—stepchildren. I cannot underscore enough that amidst the expressions of
frustration, or challenge, or anger, or even—as one respondent said of her roles as wife and mother—“I just try to maintain an air of togetherness; underneath it’s a circus,” these women are deeply committed to being the best women, wives, mothers, and career-minded people they can be.

Intersectionality theory informed my understanding of how race, class, and gender influence middle-class Black women’s marital experiences and reported marital satisfaction. Historically, Black families have relied on the economic contribution of Black women to establish middle-class standing, and to confer that class standing to their children. In fact, Black women formally entered the workforce in the United States a full two generations before white women. Prior to this participation, they endured chattel slavery and took on roles as domestics in homes throughout the United States. This study is in accord with existing research, which shows that, on average, Black middle-class women have more education and higher earnings than their husbands (Crowder & Tolnay 2000; Cooper 2016). Beyond confirming that existing research, it highlights several new developments on the intersection between socioeconomic status and marital satisfaction. While some scholars have focused on interactional and structural limitations to marriage and motherhood for Black women, very few have considered the reality and extent to which some Black women may be frustrated or burdened by nontraditional breadwinner arrangements and perhaps are less interested
in motherhood due to the ways in which it might compromise their professional trajectories and notions of personal satisfaction.

Moreover, while some scholars have established that Black women are increasingly unwilling to “marry down,” more scholars should investigate the patterns or processes involved in relationships in which Black women marry partners who have less education or fewer financial resources. The findings from this study suggest that career-minded, middle-class Black women are deeply concerned about the extent to which their husbands complement or weaken their earned or accomplished socioeconomic position. This finding alone suggests that the structural explanation for romantic partnering is far too simplistic for this population of women. For these women, it is not sufficient for a man to be single and employed, or even well educated. Using exchange theory as a guide, I learned that middle-class Black women want to know that their partners are financially responsible, and can help them achieve particular financial goals such as saving for a down payment for a new home, setting aside resources for child-related expenses, and paying down existing debt. Moreover, these findings indicate that Black middle-class women tend to take the lead on managing family finances, initiating savings and investments strategies, and—in some cases—they take jobs that provide their families with financial stability and security, and/or maintain employment as their husbands pursue additional educational credentials. These findings suggest that these women are willing to exchange independence and financial
autonomy for a stable marital relationship. These arrangements, however, come with strings attached. Women make it clear that their voices must be heard, and in some cases prioritized, in the decision making processes about financial matters including budgeting, spending, saving, investments, and debt repayment.

In addition to considering the experiences of Black middle-class women and their marital satisfaction and dissatisfaction with respect to financial matters, it is critically important to expand existing research on marriage, motherhood, and career among this population of women. Based on these findings, consistent with prior research on the subject (Barnes 2015), some career-focused Black women are making a conscious decision to downshift their career trajectories and expectations in order to focus their energy on their marriages and families. They view the time with their children as both formative and fleeting, and—as a result—they seek to maximize their time and engagement with their children, and focus on their lives at home.

Two things about this are particularly interesting. First, as I mentioned previously, there is no mention of their husbands—who in some cases earn less money than they do and have less education—taking a similar approach to their careers and families. This fact could potentially exacerbate some of the gender tensions that Hill (2004) described between Black men and Black women. At the same time, it could be the case that the respondents would not be open to the kind of arrangement in which their husbands spent more time at home with children or stepped back from their careers in
order to pursue caregiving responsibilities in their families. Future research should consider the desirability of these kinds of arrangements among middle-class Black couples.

To extend this kind of research, scholars should more carefully examine how career-focused middle-class Black women think about autonomy, freedom, and well-being in the context of their marriages and families. While there is compelling evidence that Black middle-class women derive satisfaction and stability from marriage and family, the evidence is equally compelling that Black women do not derive as much fulfillment or satisfaction as women from other racial backgrounds (Twenge & Campbell 2003). Moreover, as Rank and Davis (1996) found, Black women are more likely to report that they would be more satisfied outside of the context of their marriages than white women. Taking this into account, in line with Dillaway and Broman (2001), scholars should consider the race-class-gender combinations in analyses of marital satisfaction and also add an analysis of structural inequalities to assess how Black women’s satisfaction and dissatisfaction in marriage.

Most importantly for the direction of future research, existing literature about marital satisfaction, in particular among middle-class Black women, is too simplistic. Some scholars treat marriage as a destination for this group of women, and this notion could not be further from the truth. Most respondents in this study approach marriage as a journey or process that requires constant attention, refinement, and development.
First, it is important to investigate the range of ways in which middle-class Black women view marriage, and how their expectations about it are formed with a particular attention to their experiences in, and interactions with, interlocking systems of oppression. Future research should consider how Black women view themselves as a part of a racialized, gendered dating or marriage market, and the extent to which these perceptions influence their expectations of marriage or of their husbands. Second, scholars could contribute to this field of study by using longitudinal data to explore how marital satisfaction and dissatisfaction change over time for Black middle-class women. This study captures a snapshot of respondents’ beliefs about marriage, and their experiences in it. To develop a more comprehensive understanding of the ebbs and flows of marital satisfaction and contentment, scholars would do well to follow a group of married Black women over a five-year, ten-year, fifteen-year, or longer period of time in order to more clearly understand how relational satisfaction is achieved, maintained, and challenged over the life course.
Chapter 6. Conclusion

6.1 Summary

The thread that ties together the three studies included in this dissertation is that each examines how fundamental processes involved in romantic partnering work for middle-class Black women including: 1) the ways that respondents perceive messages that are transmitted to them during childhood and adolescence about dating, sex, and marriage; 2) the nonlinear romantic arrangements that women engage in, or settle for, and the corresponding emotions associated with these kinds of partnerships as a consequence of the disadvantaged marriage market; and 3) the qualities and characteristics of their husbands and relationships that contribute to their happiness and contentment in marriage, and the factors that compromise their marital satisfaction.

While this dissertation focuses on romantic partnering generally, I found that for middle-class Black women the desire for fulfilling, committed, loving relationships and marriages are often at odds with the realities of their families of origin whether healthy, unhealthy, or some combination of the two, the ever-evolving casual and committed dating landscape and marriage markets, and the gendered and racialized institution of marriage itself. At the same time, however, for some women, unmarried and married, mothers and non-mothers, I find that there are satisfying, loving, and stable romantic
relationships, marriages, and families. Albeit not nearly as many loving, committed relationships as I would have hoped.

In recent research on the topic of marriage, Banks (2011) posed the question “Is marriage for white people?” In his response to this question, he advised Black women to pursue romantic opportunities outside of their racial group to achieve their relational goals of marriage and family. Without any serious consideration of the gendered, racialized, classed aspects of Black women’s ability to do so, scholarly advice promoting alternative strategies to marriage and family, such as this one, are flawed in their logic and undermined by the realities of misogyny, racism, colorism, and a complicated, sometimes traumatic history of race, love, sex, fertility, and violence in the United States. Similarly, armchair relationship experts and advice columnists that advocate for women acting like ladies and thinking like men equally ignore the very real structural and behavioral factors that influence modern dating and marriage for Black women. Moreover, these experts do not take into account racism, misogyny, and socioeconomic challenges that Black men and women face in this country.

Other scholars, however, have explored the reasons Black women do not necessarily pursue relationships with non-Black men. Barnard (2011), for example, wrote of Black women: “They view interracial relationships as too complicated and see partnering with black men as an expression of a larger commitment to the race itself; often, black women aren’t as attracted to men of other races as they are to black men” (p.
Moreover, Kaba (2012) writes, “Although Black women and White men have had far more mating than Black men and White women in the history of the United States, most White men involved in such relationships have done so by treating the Black woman as a concubine, while Black men and White women carried their relationships “as equal partners.” In addition to expressing concerns over compatibility, attraction, and commitment to their race, some scholars suggest that the desire to maintain or preserve “a strong Black identity” is at stake in their decision to marry interracially. According to Morgan and Bennett (2006):

“In actuality, for African Americans of both genders, interracial relationships are not simply about individuals in a multi-colored bubble looking for ‘true love’ beneath a romantic rainbow. Choosing to intermarry or not to intermarry involves love, commitment, promises, memories, and culture and community building that reinforce cultural knowledge... Intermarriage in the United States will not dismantle the nations of China, Japan, Korea, etc. Because African Americans are a minority community without a clear nation of origin, interracial marriage raises practical concerns regarding the endurance, independence, and uniqueness of Black communities and whether their cultural practices are in jeopardy. These are concerns raised when any minority community, in any national context, assesses the impact of romantic, sexual, and marital relationships with members of a majority community. Yet, Black women are dismissed as angry when they express these concerns” (pp. 487-488).
Consistent with prior research, I found Black women’s relational aspirations and experiences are influenced and structured by factors that significantly limit their opportunity for relational equality and opportunity (Crowder & Tolnay 2000; Collins 2000; 2004; Wilson 1987; Taylor et. al 1990). Building on this existing research, I hope that this dissertation will serve as a corrective to two areas of existing scholarship. First, scholarship continues to be overly focused on the strength, resilience, and academic and professional accomplishment of middle-class Black women and largely disregards their intimate, romantic, and relational lives. Second, researchers have exhausted the notion that this group of women aspires to marriage, and there are simply not enough available partners. Instead, more research is needed to better understand Black middle class women’s beliefs and actions relative to love, partnering, marriage, and motherhood.

Although research clearly shows that Black women do excel in terms of college attendance and completion, graduate and professional completion, and continue to climb to unprecedented heights in terms of career success despite facing racism and sexism, these accomplishments represent only one dimension or aspect of Black women’s personhood and contribution to society (Epstein 1973; Cole & Omari 2003; Marsh et al. 2007; Evans 2008). The intimate and emotional lives of middle-class Black women continue to be under examined in scholarly research. This dissertation contributes to the literatures on romantic relationship development by showing that while some middle class Black women secure the kinds of relational and familial lives
they envisioned or aspired to, for others and in some cases the women who achieve the goal of marriage, there can be substantial personal, emotional, psychological, and socioeconomic costs and benefits to these arrangements. In general, I hope that the social sciences, and sociologists specifically, will be more attentive to Black women’s emotional, psychological, and relational experiences over the life course.

Furthermore, family and marriage scholars tend to elevate the benefits of marriage without carefully examining the racialized and gendered compromises or sacrifices that Black women make in their relationships. While some scholars have suggested that Black women are increasing unwilling to “marry down”, neither singleness nor marriage for middle class Black women is without significant compromise (Sweeney 2002; Marsh et al. 2007). Both relationship states have corresponding costs and benefits.

Moreover, in discussions of the changing economy and mass incarceration, more serious considerations need to be made of the consequences these shifts and trends have not only on communities of color, but also for Black women’s relational, fertility, and socioeconomic outcomes (Clarke 2011). Scholarship has explored the real consequences of Black men’s incarceration, unemployment, and lack of educational opportunity on the future of the Black family (Alexander 2010; Marable 2015). However, more consideration needs to be given to the ways that Black middle-class women are affected by these patterns. While this study uses in-depth interviews to explore the romantic patterns and
processes of middle-class Black women, ethnographers and other qualitative scholars could focus on this area of research and contribute to our knowledge on the costs and benefits associated with long-term singleness, nonlinearity in the romantic relationships, and marriage among middle-class Black women.

In each empirical chapter in this dissertation there are significant insights and takeaways. In Chapter Four, I argued that the messages Black daughters perceived receiving from their parents and the observational learning that took place in their families of origin are consequential for the kinds of beliefs that respondents hold about romantic partnering and the frameworks or blueprints respondents have to engage in romantic relationships. I drew on several cases from my study to demonstrate that Black parents employ four types of messaging about romantic relationships in their interactions with their daughters – practical, progression, protective, and principled. I argued that while some parents give their daughters practical advice about choosing a partner, some are primarily concerned with upward mobility and their daughters’ ability to maintain or improve their social class through educational investments, career advancement, and financial independence. At the same time, there is evidence that some Black parents transfer cautious, negative beliefs about men and marriage to their daughters. In addition, I noted that there is significant silence, or an absence of serious communication or dialogue about key emotional, psychological, and developmental aspects of adolescence and young adulthood. Respondents tend to pursue the kinds of
healthy relationships their parents have, adopt different forms of romantic partnering in light of their parents’ relational shortcomings, or subconsciously repeat negative patterns or behaviors in romantic partners and using certain relational strategies in the relationship. In all, Black women report receiving little to no guidance about how to understand their own emotional needs and to establish healthy romantic connections. At the same time, whether respondents were raised in upwardly mobile or middle class households was consequential for the kinds of messages respondents reported perceiving from their parents and the nature of their parents’ interactional processes. One thing I observed among upwardly mobile and middle class respondents was that they receive specific kinds of instructions on how to accomplish life with respect to their educational and professional paths. There is no messaging, however, about aspects of dating, romantic partnering, or marriage other than avoidance of sexual and emotional entanglements or self-protection. Messages that are specific about achievement and social mobility are not the same and do not correspond to success in relationship formation. Another important takeaway from this chapter is that understanding the lack of messaging respondents receive about romantic relationships actually lead me to consider what kinds of romantic relationships women find themselves in later in life.

In Chapter Five, I found that the gender imbalance in the dating and marriage markets among Black men and Black women contribute to Black women engaging in nonlinear romantic interactions. While extant research describes the relationship
formation process as linear in nature, with clearly defined stages (initiation, evaluation, maintenance, permanence or dissolution) (Bryant & Conger 2002), I showed that Black middle class women’s romantic interactions tend to be characterized by uncertainty and movement. For some respondents, the lines or boundaries at different stages of a relationship process are blurred, the expectations and conditions can be unclear, and even when women articulate certain relational thresholds, these thresholds shift based on their beliefs, cognitions, evaluations, and the actions or events involved in the context of the relationship. In other words, these relationships and interactions are characterized a great deal of uncertainty. Prior to this study, sociological insights of the gender imbalance and its influence on romantic relationships among Blacks have focused primarily on marriage as an outcome. More systematic research needs to be done in order to examine the consequences that the gender imbalance may have on the relationship formation process, and specifically for middle-class Black women, the kinds and quality of romantic relationships or arrangements that women settle for or choose to engage in. In this chapter, I did not find any salient differences between the kinds of nonlinearity that upwardly mobile and middle class women’s experienced. However, thought these analyses I became attentive to the ways that nonlinearity may influence how women think about and approach marriage. In part, based on the kinds of messaging respondents received in childhood and adolescence, and later the kinds of nonlinearity, emotions, and uncertainty experienced in dating relationships, alongside
the ideology about achievement and attainment among middle-class Black women, some of their beliefs about romantic relationships and marriage are more about “I” than “we”.

Unfortunately for respondents, no amount of education, professional success, or earnings prepared women for the reality of the relational landscape and romantic relationships. Instead, they have to keep trying at it until they get it right. As I articulated in Chapter 5, the romantic experiences women engage in are not dating in the traditional sense. And on top of the nonlinearity involved in these romantic interactions, respondents experience emotions and emotional vulnerabilities that they do not entirely know how to navigate. Moreover, all of this is being played out in a broader landscape of relational uncertainty and respondents themselves are encumbered by a “Black tax”. These processes are neither linear in direction, nor rational or logical in process. As such, for career-minded women who are accustomed to practices and processes that make sense, the heart, emotions, and romantic involvements do not always.

In Chapter Six, I examined marital satisfaction and dissatisfaction among married Black women. I found that there were some distinctions in marital satisfaction and dissatisfaction among upwardly mobile and middle class respondents. Most salient among these differences were that upwardly mobile respondents were hyper vigilant about their sense of security, financial and otherwise, in their marriages. Whereas
respondents who were raised in middle class households were concerned about finances and certainly expressed concerns about financial and other kinds of security, they did not communicate the same level of intensity about their concerns, nor did they reference issues or experiences from their family of origin to explain their fears, anxieties, or frustrations about aspects of their marriages.

Research on marital satisfaction among Black women is important as researchers highlight the proportion of Black women in the United States that are unmarried and/or childless. In recent years, greater attention has been paid to the concept of “Black Love” and television shows, musicians, and artists have encouraged Blacks to embrace and promote positive representations of Black couples and families. In light of these trends in popular media, I examined the process of relationship formation among married respondents including their motivation for choosing their husbands, the aspects of their marriage that they find to be pleasing or fulfilling, and whether they perceive marriage to be “hard work”. At the same time, I gave attention to the themes that emerge among respondents related to sources of marital dissatisfaction or concern. I argued that three areas of dissatisfaction including financial and economic concerns, the challenge of balancing work and motherhood, and the need for autonomy and personal freedom in marriage are prominent among Black middle class women. On average, consistent with prior research, respondents earn more and have more education than their husbands (Hill 2003). Based on the interviews, respondents also tend to be the partner most
concerned with financial savings and security. Black married women’s focus on and concern over these matters may compromise their overall marital satisfaction. In addition, for mothers in the study, consistent with other research on the topic of marriage, career, and motherhood among Black women (Barnes 2015), highly educated, career minded Black women are modifying their work demands, trajectories, and schedules in order to prioritize their children. At the same time, however, it should come as no surprise that respondents who tend to do more in terms of child care and housework, that this might be an area of conflict or dissatisfaction. Finally, respondents express a need for autonomy and freedom. While marriage, and in some cases children, is very much what these respondents desired, Black middle class women also express a desire for autonomy and freedom. As American men and women continue to delay marriage and individuals spend more and more time outside of the institution of marriage, the need for autonomy, freedom, and personal growth within marriages could possibly become more prominent in American marriages (Finkel 2007).

This desire for time and personal freedom has particular consequences for Black women, men, and the family. Career-focused middle class Black women will likely continue to experience specific kinds of racialized and gendered discrimination in the workplace. Thus, at home they will seek to find fulfillment and balance with respect to their relational and familial responsibilities. As such, gendered roles and expectations should be reimagined among Black married couples, and adjustments related to the
division of labor in households could be further renegotiated. Ultimately, issues related to the family and Black marriages are gendered in the sense that many women feel as if they carry most of the responsibility for specific responsibilities. These problems do not belong to women alone, and for the sake of the stability and contentment of these unions, these issues have to be considered and taken up by men as well.

The two most important conclusions from this chapter are related to the idea of achievement among middle-class Black women. These highly accomplished women are able to secure marriage as a goal, and for the most part, many of them derive happiness and satisfaction from their marital relationships. At the same time, however, some women are unable to fully translate their success in other aspects of life to fully reap the benefits of a happy marriage. Some women seem to have the capacity to grow to become more satisfied or content in their marriages, while others seem to be a bit stuck in beliefs, patterns of thinking, or mindsets that make it more challenging to fully experience satisfying, fulfilling marriages.

6.2 Limitations and Future Directions

There are three primary limitations to this dissertation. The first concerns generalizability. I used a snowball sample which means I cannot generalize these findings to a broader population of women in these strata. Despite my inability to generalize to an entire population, the arguments I make in this dissertation add to the
existing theories of romantic partnering by showing how particular aspects of the relationship formation process are influenced by family processes, such as specific kinds of messaging about romantic partnering from Black parents to their children.

Further, although this research cannot be generalized to a statistical population, when taken together with the statistics on the declining rates of marriage among Blacks in the United States, the rise of singleness among Black men and women, and the decoupling of marriage and childbearing among Blacks, this dissertation provides a compelling description of the experiences of this cohort of Black middle class women in romantic relationships and interactions. As is typical of qualitative research, a survey research component based upon my claims could be added to future studies to include a larger proportion of Black middle-class women, to assess their beliefs about and actions in the context of romantic relationships, and how romantic relationships develop among this population.

A second limitation of this study is that each respondent was only interviewed at one point in time. The cross-sectional nature of this data limits what I can say about how these issues unfold over the life course. However, the existing research on romantic partnering suggests that marital satisfaction remains relatively stable over the duration of a marriage (Vaillant & Vaillant 1993) and in some cases can significantly decline after the birth of a child (Shapiro, Gottman, Carrere, 2000; Dew and Wilcox 2011). Furthermore, several of the respondents I interviewed described events in their families
of origin, past relationships, and current romantic involvements. As such, I am relying on respondent’s recall of specific events from across their life course beginning in childhood through the present. While Jerolmack and Khan (2014) suggest that memory recall can in some cases be false or self-serving, the consistency between and among within- and cross-group comparisons relative to particular kinds of messaging or observations in childhood, specific romantic or relational occurrences and events, or particular feelings or sentiments in the context of their marriages, gives me a great deal of confidence about my findings. Moreover, these consistencies signal to me that my assertion of particular patterns or problems associated with romantic partnering among this population of women are well founded.

Although my dissertation draws out many of the assets and challenges associated with romantic partnering for Black middle class women, I understand that collecting longitudinal data would strengthen my work by providing a more complete picture of how race, class, gender, and power structure the romantic opportunities of Black middle-class women. Moreover, beginning this kind of research with Black adolescent daughters and following them over ten, fifteen, or even twenty years would give me a much richer, fuller picture of how life course transitions and trajectories related to the family of origin, dating, romantic partnering, fertility, marriage, and divorce unfold among this population of women. This type of intergenerational research is particularly important, as I do not know, for example, parents’ motivations for
communication or withholding certain kinds of information or messaging from their daughters. This kind of data would give me a more complete picture of understanding the relational dynamics present in the family of origin and the ways that upwardly mobile and middle class parents’ priorities may have aligned or differed in their approaches to raising their daughters. Further, more research is needed on how race, gender, class, and power complicate family relations for Black middle class women over the long term. Once respondents do marry, which more than three quarters of all Black women do over their life course, their trajectories can be complicated by a host of factors, including the earnings, savings, accumulated wealth, out of wedlock childbearing, multiple partner fertility, incarceration, debt, caregiving responsibilities, economic shifts, and changing desires or expectations of a romantic partner.

A third limitation of this work is that, although I discuss matters relative to family members and romantic partners, I do not actually interview respondent’s parents or current or former romantic partners. I found these respondents to be very forthcoming both about information about themselves, and also about sensitive matters relating to their parents’ romantic relationships and their partners and husbands. In order to have a richer, complex perspective on some of the processes and arrangements that I discuss in each study, it would be enlightening to interview respondent’s parents and past or current boyfriends, partners, or husbands.
6.3 Recommendations for Future Research

With this study, progress has been made in understanding the romantic partnering practices and processes of middle-class Black women, however, many important research questions remain. As such, more research is needed in the areas of commitment and marriage among middle-class Black women, Black men and romantic partnering.

6.3.1 Modernizing Dating, Courtship, and Commitment Among Black Americans

Despite my efforts to better understand the relationship formation process, my efforts unexpectedly led me down unforeseen pathways. Instead of focusing on how a relationship is formed and progresses from one stage to the next, a fruitful area of research is to describe the modern romantic relationship practices of Black middle class women. In Chapter 5, I argued that dating is distinct from nonlinearity and the kinds of romantic involvements women are engaged in. Some scholars have considered the use of technology in modern dating experiences and the ways that dating and romantic partnering has dramatically changed in the digital age (Ansari & Klinenberg 2015). More scholarly attention should be paid to the ways that technology influences the dating patterns and trends of Black women. Several studies have found that Black women are evaluated more negatively on online dating sites (Fisman, Iyengar, Kamenica, & Simonson 2008; Yancey 2009). Beyond the use of dating applications, it would be
interesting to learn more about the ways that functions and platforms such as text messaging, FaceTime, and social media influences modern dating experiences among middle-class Black women.

6.3.2 Integrating the Perspectives of Black Men

One of the most exciting opportunities family and marriage scholars have is to develop a comprehensive research agenda around the romantic partnering practices of Black men. While there is some research on Black men’s involvement in marriages (King & Allen 2009; Crowder & Tolnay 2000), much of the existing research focuses on Black men’s retreat from marriage and participation in nontraditional romantic arrangements from the perspective of their female partners (e.g. multiple partner fertility, rostering, cohabitation, and marriage). Some studies involving Black men actually focus on their perceptions of the challenges involved in Black male and Black female relationships (Cazenave 1983). One scholar ironically queried married Black men about why there are so many single Black women (Hurt 2014). Rather than examining Black men’s involvement in romantic relationships from the perspective of their partners or asking Black men to explain the singleness of their Black women counterparts, centering the experiences of Black men and exploring their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, attitudes, and actions in romantic relationships would be enlightening. Moreover, combining this kind of research on middle-class Black men with this dissertation study on Black women
would create a richer, more complete picture of exactly what is happening in these romantic relationships and marriages. In addition to contributing to the literatures on dating and marriage, this kind of research would contribute to the study of race and emotions and make a major contribution to undoing the gender bias present in extant literature on emotions that focuses primarily on women.

6.3.3 Incorporating the Viewpoints of LGBTQIA+ Black Women

This study focused almost exclusively on the experiences of heterosexual Black women. While one woman in the study identified as bisexual and reported on her experiences in one lesbian relationship, she expressed a clear desire to marry and start a family with a man. I specifically asked each respondent whether they date or have relationships with women, only the aforementioned respondent indicated that she either identified as bisexual or was open to relationships with women. Clearly that overrepresentation of heterosexual Black women in this study was not by design. Rather it is an artifact of the snowball sampling strategy.

Future studies should examine the romantic and relational practices of lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual Black women generally and among middle-class Black women in particular. As much of the existing research has focused on low-income and poor Black women, and some recent research has more carefully considered the romantic and relational experiences of middle-class Black women, fewer
studies have examined the relationship aspirations, practices and processes of non-cisgendered, heterosexual Black women. Not only will this research inform our perspectives about romantic partnering, romance, intimacy, relationship formation processes, and marriage among this population of women, it will inform our understanding of gender identity and its association with partnering. Moreover, it will give us insight into the emotional and psychological processes and considerations involved in LGBTQIA+ romantic interactions, relationships, and marriages.

6.4 Policy Implications

There are a number of policy implications that can be drawn from this work. One major conclusion is that despite Black women’s significant academic and professional accomplishments, they desire romantic companionship with partners who are like them—educated, accomplished, and financially secure. Moreover, though these analyses are not discussed in the dissertation but are substantiated by other studies of romantic partnering and marriage, most respondents express a desire to be partnered with Black men (Collins 2002; Dixon 2009; Banks 2011). To be clear, most Black men who choose to marry in the United States marry Black women. In fact, according to Toldson and Marks (2011) upwards of 80 percent of Black men who are married are married to Black women, and of this percentage of Black men, 85 percent of Black men who hold college degrees marry Black women. As such, while marriage rates are on the decline for all
racial groups and in particular for Black women, there are many reasons to be optimistic about the state of Black marriages, Black love, and the Black family. As such, one major policy angle should focus on improving the educational and economic prospects of young Black men, the group most likely to marry and create families with Black women.

### 6.4.1 Educational Attainment and Socioeconomic Outcomes for Black Boys and Men

Schools and school districts could be held to higher standards for graduation and college placement rates for Black boys and men. For instance, an educational policy that has been hotly debated in the K-12 education system is disproportionality in special education assignments of Black and Latino boys. Evidence shows that students of color continue to be disproportionately identified as disabled and disproportionately placed in more restrictive special education environments than their white peers (Hehir, 2002; Parrish, 2002; Fierros & Conroy, 2002). In cases of overrepresentation, there are many problems associated with the mislabeling of students as disabled including the likelihood that students will receive unnecessary special education services and supports. Misidentified students are likely to experience decreased access to a rigorous, general education curriculum and diminished academic expectations from teachers (Harry & Klingner, 2006, as cited in Truth in Labeling: Disproportionality in Special Education, NEA Report 2007).
Rectifying this disproportionality and otherwise increasing access to high quality educational experiences for boys and young men of color, could positively impact the proportion of Black young men who attend college, and thereby improve their educational and economic outcomes. Increasing or expanding postsecondary education pipeline programs for young Black men is one way to approach rectifying the gender imbalance between Black men and women and the availability of “suitable partners” for Black women.

Another approach is to intensify efforts to end mass incarceration and disrupt the school to prison pipeline. It has been widely documented that the United States has the highest incarceration rates of any industrialized nation in the world, and the jails and prisons in the United States are disproportionately filled with Black and Latino men (Alexander 2010). Roughly 30 percent of the United States population is comprised of Blacks and Latinos, and yet, this population represents more than 60 percent of the prison population in the United States. In fact, one in three Black men will be incarcerated in his lifetime (Advancement Project 2007). Existing research has widely established that students of color experiencing harsher discipline and being more likely to be expelled from schools than white students (Civil Rights Data Collection 2009). As such the criminalization of children and adolescents of color begins around the same time that scholars begin focusing on their dating and romantic experiences. School districts, social service agencies, and community organizations have to be involved in
the process of dismantling inequitable treatment of students of color in America’s schools. Strategies including the use of positive behavioral interventions, establishing agreements between the school district police and local police departments to establish limits in the number of arrests, restraints, etc., provide teachers with additional training to support students of color and at-risk students, school based interventions to decrease the number of out of school suspensions, and additional resources and supports for low-income and poor parents and students including afterschool tutoring, enrichment programming, and homework assistance. These policy changes seek to address the issue of the gender imbalance between Black men and Black women. It does not, however, address the multilayered problem of mistrust between Black men and women, differential rates of interracial marriage by Black men and women, or the issues related to gender and power present in heteronormative relationships.

6.4.2 The Role of Religious Institutions in Changing Romantic and Relational Norms

Institutions that could positively contribute to this endeavor are religious ones. Conservative Christian organizations such as Focus on the Family tend to focus on white evangelicals’ marriages and families, while historically Black churches and the Black Muslims tend to reify gender norms and reinforce the subjugation of Black women to Black men. Within the ranks of historically Black denominations, some that still refuse to ordain women, it would be ideal for some of the more progressive pastors and bishops
to reimagine the gospel of Biblical or Quranic submission and put forth policies, programming, and teachings that uplift the full humanity of both genders and find ways to promote equality and a complementary ethic of marriage.

6.4.3 Family Policy: Race, Class, and Gender

Of course, the policy challenges surrounding dating and family are more complex. The challenges experienced in families of origin and in marriage, are enduring and not easily amenable to policy changes. As scholars have established, marriage and family places increasing demands on individuals and the demands between work, family, and motherhood are, in ways, in greater conflict than ever before. Further, while there is research on the motherhood penalty, there is little research on the economic effects of Black mother’s decision to adjust their professional trajectories after becoming mothers. Moreover, there is little research on the perspectives of Black men involved in romantic partnering. This is clearly a fruitful area of family research, as much of the emphasis on Black women’s relational outcomes has focused on the availability and decision making of Black men. The little we know about the romantic partnering practices of middle class Black men is mixed as it relates to partnering with Black women. While some scholars suggest that Black men who are most well educated and have the highest incomes are most likely to date and marry interracially (Fryer 2007), we also know that the vast majority of Black men marry Black women. “For heterosexual
African American men, choosing to love and commit to a heterosexual relationship with a Black women is a rebellious act. By choosing to love women whom society has so demonized, Black men exhibit a form of ‘strength’ … (Collins, 2004, p. 152)”

Understanding how Black men choose who to date and how they partner over the life course is an important area to deepen our understanding of the factors involved in these processes. White supremacy is so deeply entrenched in our collective consciousness and beliefs about beauty, value, stereotypes, and family formation that these issues can be challenging to address at a policy level. The economic, educational, and religious institutional factors and policies associated with romantic partnering are a viable first step.

6.4.4 Interracial Dating and Marriage Among Black Women

While there is an abundance of research that focuses on the gender imbalance both for college-aged Black women and middle-class Black women, less research exists on Black women’s experiences in interracial dating. First, in analyses not presented in this study, respondents expressed serious concerns over dating non-Black men, with some going so far as to say that they not only prefer Black men, but they prefer African American men. In addition to having concerns over cultural compatibility with White, Asian, or Latino men, respondents expressed more openness to, and at the same time, some doubts over their ability to connect with Caribbean and African men. Some
women highlighted the sense that they feel that some African and Caribbean men actually look down on them or feel superior to them. For respondents who have dated interracially, a few expressed concerns over specific racialized incidents that occurred in these dating interactions (e.g. a reluctance to introduce a respondent to members of his family, insensitive comments about complexion and/or hair texture or styling).

As such, institutions, including the Christian Church, other religious organizations and schools need to expand their teachings and admonishments to Black women to include messaging to Black men and men of other races about the realities of modern dating and marriage. More work needs to be done in the context of the family to make gendered expectations and realities more salient and to undo some of the harmful practices associated with patriarchy, sexism, racism, and colorism.

In addition, in order to prepare Black daughters and sons to engage with each other romantically, in heterosexual or homosexual unions, greater attention needs to be paid to childhood and adolescent emotional development in families, schools, extracurricular programs, and in media consumed by youth. Candace’s observation about the lack of guidance she received about dating and partnering in high school is not uncommon. While a great deal of attention is paid to teenage pregnancy and out of wedlock childbearing, more attention needs to be paid to emotional and romantic development among this population of young people. Moreover, organizations that work with students need to be prepared to not just focus on sex education or abstinence
only programs in schools, young people need guidance in exploring and understanding their own emotions, identifying healthy and unhealthy romantic and sexual behaviors, and opportunities to engage in healthy interactions with the same or opposite sex partners.
Appendix A. Interview Guide for Respondents

Introduction
Thank you for your willingness to meet with me about my project. From our previous conversation and the materials I shared with you via email, you know that I am interested in understanding women’s perspectives on romantic relationships. Before we get started, is there anything you would like to ask me about the project? Or would you like me to clarify anything we’ve already discussed?

Okay great, first, are you currently single, married, dating, cohabitating? Do you have any children? Does your husband or partner have any children?

Thank you. So, how are you? How have things been going?

Family Background, Perceptions, and Experiences:
To start, I would like to ask you some questions about your family and your family’s interactions while you were growing up.
1. Can you tell me about your parent’s relationship or your parents’ relationship with a significant other – a stepparent or boyfriend/girlfriend? How would you describe their interaction?
2. What advice did you receive as a child or adolescent about romantic relationships?

Initiation
Next, I would like to ask you some questions about the beginning phases of your interaction with a new love interest or potential partner.
1. What kinds of men are you/were you attracted to? What are you looking for in a partner?
2. Do you think you’ll find what you’re looking for?
3. How did you meet your last or current romantic partner?
   a. How open are you to online dating? What have your experiences been like?
   b. Do friends try to introduce you to men? How have these introductions turned out?
4. What do you do to attract someone you are interested in?
   a. How important is your own physical attractiveness in your dating experiences? What do you do to “keep yourself up”?
5. What have men done to let you know they are serious about getting to know you?
6. Some people have told me that what they wanted in a partner was different when they were younger than it is now. When you were 15/16, what did you think your romantic life would be like now? When you were in college, what kind of guy did you think you would end up with?
7. Can you walk me through how you communicated your expectations to your last romantic partner?
Evaluation

Now, I would like to ask you some questions about how you think about or evaluate whether a potential partner is meeting your expectations and needs.

1. Generally, today, how would you describe your thoughts and feelings about romantic interactions or relationships?
2. Tell me about a positive experience you have had in dating. How did this experience shape how you think about or approach future relationships?
3. Tell me about an interaction or a relationship that was not so positive. How did this influence how you think about dating or relationships?
4. What does intimacy mean to you?
   a. What makes you feel close to a romantic partner? Vulnerable?
5. Growing up, I was told that I couldn’t expect a man to be faithful. What has your experience been? What do you expect in terms of fidelity and trust in a relationship?
6. For some women, religious beliefs are important as they think about things like sex, marriage, and having children. How do your religious beliefs influence your decision to have premarital sex? The timing of having children, or the importance of your partners’ religious beliefs?
7. For some women, the kinds of relationships they engage in are different than they expected. Have you ever found yourself in a romantic or sexual situation or relationship that you never thought you would -- with a married man, someone you knew was in a relationship, a woman, or any other situation that is different than what you expected?
8. What kinds of hard decisions have come up in your romantic relationships? What compromises or trade-offs are you willing to make in your pursuit of romantic partnership?
9. Do you/did you have any fears about becoming romantically involved with someone?

Maintenance

At this point in our conversation, I would like to ask you some questions about how you seek to maintain romantic relationship or interaction.

1. What assets or strengths did you bring to your last romantic relationship? What kinds of things do you wish you had done differently?
2. For some people, sex is a casual thing. For some, it is more serious. How do you know that you are ready to be physically intimate with your partner?
   a. What does sex mean to you?
   b. Do you communicate any expectations about sex to your partner?
3. Do you feel like your friends have different or similar expectations of relationships?
   a. How would you describe your single friends?
   b. What have you seen happen in their relationships?
   c. Describe the timing of your relationships compared to that of your friends.
4. Have you made any compromises in your most recent romantic relationship? Can you tell me about these compromises or trade-offs?
5. How important is sexual fulfillment in your life? Are you open to purely sexual relationships?
6. Who sets the pace of a relationship? Are there things you felt you wanted to ask for but could not get from a romantic partner?
7. What does the phrase “friends with benefits” mean to you? Have you ever had a friend with benefits? How did this arrangement come about?
8. What do you do when you are mad at your partner? What happened the last time you were angry at someone you were dating or in a relationship with?
9. Can you tell me about a time when you’ve been unfaithful in a relationship or engaged in an extramarital or extra-relationship affair?

Permanence
Now that we’ve talked about how you seek to maintain relationships, I would like to ask you some questions about commitment and the permanence of relationships.
1. Do you aspire to be married? Why or why not?
   a. If you desire to be married, how will you know that you want to marry your romantic partner?
   b. If you do not desire to be married, what do you want your romantic, intimate life to look like?
2. The average age of marriage in the United States is 26 years old for women. Why aren’t you married? Was it an accident or an intentional decision?
3. What do you think it will take to have a forever love? “Happily ever after”?
4. As you know, this study focuses on middle class black women. What would a high status marriage mean to you or other women you know?
5. What expectations do you have of your marriage or partnership in terms of financial arrangements? Specifically, how do you plan to manage bank accounts, credit cards, and other short and long-term financial responsibilities?
6. Do you expect your partner to be a provider? If so, what does this look like to you? If not, how do you plan to divide bills in your household?
7. What challenges do you think most marriages go through? Are these issues that you could work through?
8. What does “committed” mean to you? How long should the dating relationship last before a commitment is made? What considerations have you made/will you make to determine whether a commitment is desirable?

Dissolution
We’ve talked about how relationships are initiated, maintained, and how you know whether or not they will be permanent. I would now like to ask you some questions about how you end romantic interactions.
1. Tell me about your last relationship. How long did the relationship last? What was good and bad about the interaction? What lessons did you learn?
2. Can you tell me about a time when you were relationship that you felt could have been better, or you felt a romantic partner did not meet your expectations? What did they do? How did their actions make you feel?
3. In your last interaction, “situation-ship”, or relationship, how did you know it was time for the relationship to end or for you to move on?
How Marriage Influences The Quality of Relationships:
I want to ask you some questions about your decision to marry and your experience in marriage generally.
1. Why did you choose your husband over other potential romantic partners?
2. What would be the line for divorce or the dissolution of your relationship?
3. What would you do if your husband lost his job? How would you deal with a long spell of unemployment?
4. I’ve heard some women describe marriage as “hard work”. Does this description resonate with you?
   a. If yes, how so? If no, how would you characterize marriage?

How Motherhood Structures Romantic Partnerships:
Now, I would like to ask you some questions about how being a mom influences your romantic partnering decisions.
For single mothers:
1. How does being a mother influence how you meet potential partners?
   a. Where do you typically meet men?
   b. How does your child/ren’s father feel about you dating?
   c. How would you describe your co-parenting relationship with your child/ren’s father?
2. How do you expect a romantic partner to be involved in your children’s lives?
   a. When does this process usually begin? How do you know a potential partner is ready to meet your child/ren?
3. What role did your most recent romantic partner play in your child/ren’s lives?
4. Describe the ideal balance between being a romantic partner, a mother, and a career woman.

For married mothers:
1. How did you and your husband decide to have a child?
2. How has being a mother changed your romantic relationship?
3. How has being a mother changed your professional life?

How Being Black and Female Matters for Romantic Partnerships:
I would now like to ask you some questions about how being a black woman influences your interaction with potential or current romantic partners.
1. What kinds of things have you heard about romantic relationships between black men and Black women?
2. Do you believe that dating is different for Black women than it is for other women?
   a. If yes, how so?
   b. If no, why not?
3. Should you decide to engage in a long-term relationship, do you have a preference for it to be with a black man? (If yes, do you think this is true for black men?)
   a. What brought about this decision?
   b. Why do you feel that way?
4. For your friends who are successfully partnered or married, what makes these relationships successful?
5. How would you describe your friend’s reactions to your most recent romantic relationship?
a. Do you feel like your friends are generally supportive? How so?
b. Do you sense that there is any competition between you and your friends in terms of romance or romantic interaction or partnering?

6. I’ve heard women say that being light skinned or having “nice” hair attracts certain kinds of black men. More recently, I’ve heard black women talk about “foreign” or “exotic” looking women being desirable to black men. How true do you think these ideas are?

7. Have you ever dated or would you date someone outside of your race? What was that experience like?
   a. What would it mean for you to partner with someone of a different race or ethnicity long-term?

8. Are you open to dating men who have been married before? Men from different racial or ethnic backgrounds? Different class backgrounds? Bi-sexual men? Formerly incarcerated men? Men with children? Women?

**Work-Life Balance:**
Finally, I want to ask you some questions about how you balance your romantic life with your personal and professional commitments.

1. How important is your job to you right now? How do your professional responsibilities influence your ability to date or develop a relationship?

2. What professional goals have you set for yourself? In 5 years? In 10 years? In 20 years?

3. How much time do you have to invest in a romantic relationship? How much time can you give to other people including family or friends?

4. Do you feel any pressure to settle down or get married? If so, where does this pressure come from?

5. A lot of people are on social media nowadays (e.g. Twitter, Instagram, Facebook). Can you tell me about how social media influences your view or your friends’ views of major life events and relationships (e.g. engagements, marriage, family, having children, etc.)?

6. What do you plan to tell your children/nieces and nephews/friends’ children about dating and marriage?

[Give respondents the Personal Background and Demographics Page]

Wrap Up- Before we end, is there anything about your romantic or intimate life or partnering practices that you think is important for me to know?
Appendix B. Personal Background and Demographics

1. Where are you from originally? Where do you currently reside? How long have you lived here?

2. What college did you attend? In what year did you graduate?
   a. Major/minor
   b. Clubs/organizations/Activities

3. What was the first job you took after college? Where were you located?

4. Did you pursue a graduate or professional degree?
   a. If yes, what program? Which university did you attend?

5. What was your father’s highest level of education/occupation? What was your mother’s highest level of education/occupation?

6. What was your grandparents’ highest level of education? (Paternal and maternal)

7. If your parents or grandparents did not raise you, what is the highest level of education your guardian achieved?

8. Do you have siblings?
   a. Siblings’ highest level of education/occupation
   b. Siblings’ age(s)

9. Are your parents currently married? How long have they been married?

10. What is your estimated household income?
    a. What are your estimated current earnings?
    b. What are your spouse’s current earnings?

11. What is the estimated total amount of student debt you currently owe?

12. What is the estimated total amount of wealth you currently hold (401k, savings, home value/equity, etc.)?

13. What is your race?

14. How old are you?

15. Do you have any children? If yes, what are their ages/genders?
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Biography

LesLeigh Domanique Ariel Ford was born on May 5, 1984 in Grosse Pointe, Michigan. She received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science and English from The University of Michigan in 2005 and a Master of Educational Studies from the University of Michigan’s School of Education in 2006. She pursued further graduate studies at The Harvard Graduate School of Education, where she received a Master’s degree in Education Policy and Management in 2013. She earned her Master’s degree in Sociology in 2017 and will receive a Ph.D. in Sociology from Duke University in May 2018.

LesLeigh received the Rackham Merit Fellowship during her Master’s program at the University of Michigan. She also received several fellowships while attending Duke University: a Dean’s Graduate Fellowship (2014-2018), a Social Science and Policy Forum (SSPF) Pre-dissertation Fellowship at The University of Pennsylvania (2015), the Social Science Research Institute’s (SSRI) Education and Human Development (EHD) Fellowship (2015-2016), and a Kenan Institute of Ethics Graduate Fellowship (2016-17). She is also a member of professional organizations including the American Sociological Association and the Southern Sociological Society.