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Defining Marriageability: Black Men Graduate Student's Definition of a Marriageable Man

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Defining Marriageability: Black Men Graduate Student's Definition of a Marriageable Man.

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of the requirements of degree of
Master of Arts in Sociology

by

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Abstract

The project aims to explore Black graduate men's conception of the term *Marriageable Man*.

Traditionally, men's marriageability has been defined by their ability to attain consistent income and or in their ability to provide for a wife or a family (Johnson and Loscocco 2015; King and Allen 2009a). However, there is a need for more holistic marriageability measurements due to the evolution of marriage practices and desires (Coontz 2006, 2007). Marriageability is contextualized through classed definitions and presents different requirements for one's SES standing (Bridges and Boyd 2016). This project seeks to add to the literature by exploring Black men in graduate or professional studies and their understanding(s) of the term *Marriageable Man*. Due to their unique social standing position as men achieving higher education and as future potential high earners, their perspectives are important to marriageability studies.

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Introduction

Successful marriages and marital satisfaction of Black men and women have been linked to educational and employment achievement (Banks 2011; Bowleg 2004). Specifically, there is an increased chance and probability for marriage for Black men when having a secured job and a high income (Gibson-Davis, Edin, and McLanahan 2005; Hill 2009; Smock, Manning, and Porter 2005). Rising rates of unemployment have led some to describe a perceived shortage of Black "marriageable men" (Harcknett and McLanahan 2004; Raley et al. 2015). Some scholars describe the "depletion effect," or the absence of marriageable men (Clayton and Moore 2003) due to the lack of educational and job opportunities (Anderson 2018; Marks et al. 2008; Staples 1987; Wilson 1987, 2011). When Black men do find work or employment opportunities, they find themselves being sanctioned and policed more than their white counterparts (Mong and Roscigno 2010). Additionally, young college educated Black men earn less than their white male counterparts and experience more difficulty transitioning to work regardless of their educational achievements (Raley et al. 2015; Wagmiller and Lee 2014).

Most literature has examined marriageability or "marriageable men" within Black spaces by measuring unemployment (Banks 2011; Bowleg 2004), incarceration rates (Clayton and Moore 2003), accumulated wealth through homeownership and education and financial attainment abilities (Edin 2000; King and Allen 2009; Marks et al. 2010; and Oppenheimer 2003). Combined, these structural conditions influence Black men's marriageability or marriage market attractiveness (Gibson-Davis et al. 2005; Lloyd and South 1996; Marks et al. 2008; Smock et al. 2005) as well as waned commitment to marriage and cohabitation decisions (Smock, Casper, and Wyse 2008).

For the Black men who have been able to gain mobility and higher levels of education, the experiences are quite different. Research has suggested that for better-off Black men, their mobility and status allow them bargaining power within dating and mate selection due to the disproportionate rates of formally educated Black men (low) to Black women (high) (Banks 2011). As class orientations allow individuals' access to different social spaces, Black men who have attained higher education levels can meet women entertaining various socioeconomic levels who can be their potential dating mates. Scholarship has also noted a rise in Black/White interracial marriages has created a "squeeze" dynamic for Black women as white women tend to marry up (Kalmijn 1993).

This research examines how Black men in graduate or professional studies' degree programs understand the concept of *Marriageable Man*. Using a qualitative approach, I interview Black men who are currently pursuing graduate degrees at various institutions. This study adds to the call for exploring Black men's attitudes towards marriage (Hurt 2013, 2014; Marks et al. 2008; Perry 2013) and their understanding of what it means to be a marriageable black man. In this study, I contribute to the literature on marriageability and Black men's attitudes towards marriage. Furthermore, within relationship studies among college students, Black students lack equitable representation in comparison to White students (Stackman, Reviere, and Medley 2016). Their perspectives as graduate students, and as future middle- or upper-class marriageable men adds to marriageability literature.

Literature Review: Marriageability Factors

Scholars have noted that marital patterns across all racial groups have been affected by limiting economic advancement for men in the U.S. across racial groups (Blau, Kahn, and Waldfogel 2000). Education, employment, income, and local availability of men have been cited

as significant impactors for Black and white women in family formations (Bennett, Bloom, and Craig 1992; Fossett and Kiecolt 1993; Lichter, LeClere, and McLaughlin 1991). Men who lack socioeconomic quality—stable jobs, high income, education— are deemed to be less marriageable, as economically sound men are significant determinants in women's mate or partner selection (Lichter et al. 1992, 1991; Wilson 1987).

Poor economic advancement makes it harder for Black men to achieve the provider role warranted to be marriageable (Johnson and Loscocco 2015). Thus, some Black men retreat away from marriage due to their inability to provide (Dixon 2009; Gibson-Davis et al. 2005; Lawson and Thompson 1996). Equally, Black men who can attain stable income and employment are more likely to marry than their unemployed counterparts (Testa and Krogh 1995).

Social scientists have pointed to sex ratio-imbalances and the shortage of "marriageable men" as factors for low marriage rates among Black people (Lichter et al. 1992; Staples 1987). The sex ratio hypothesis asserts that marriage rates are governed by the demographic availability of members of the opposite sex (Akers 1967). However, for black adults, in particular, the sex-ratio imbalance among college-educated black men and women has had consequences for marriage. In 2000, out of 1.5 million Black people over the age of 25 with advanced graduate degrees, 879,000 were men, and 610,000 were men (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). Black women's difficulty to find men who match their educational achievements has been theorized as a reason for Black marital decline (Chapman 2007; Garrison 2007).

Black women are presented with the option to stay single and relinquish marriage plans, have children alone, or date or marry men with less education or lower-income making jobs (Marsh et al., 2007). However, scholars offered that women "marrying down" (below one's educational or SES standing) may present relationship conflicts and struggles for Black men and

Black women (Boyd-Franklin 2013). Related, patriarchal marriage practices assert that men should have more educational attainment than their partners, which makes marriage difficult for women with high levels of education. Men also may find women with higher forms of education to be more assertive and or experience insecurities with their partner's education which may also penalize Black women within dating practices (Chapman 2007).

Due to the lack of substantial social science literature focusing on desired marriage partners from Black people, King and Allen (2009) researched what those desired characteristics consisted of, and found that a significant percentage of Black men and women imagine their ideal partner to be "reliable, monogamous, affectionate, financially stable, and African American" (pg. 583). They also discovered that both Black men and women desired a partner whose income would aid them in achieving a middle-class standing. King and Allen also highlighted that the subject of Black marriageability rarely made it into social science literature.

Despite the limited appearance of data regarding Black marriageability in social science literature, King and Allen found discussions of marriageability and a Marriageable Man's concept had been consistently addressed in popular Black magazines and newspapers. For example, in the article "Black Women Miss Chances for that Mrs" (1991) published in the Detroit Free Press, Krakinowski confers that professional Black women seek "someone who is educated and financially self-sufficient and who shares comparable values—in other words, someone like themselves" (Krakinowski 1991:1E). Thus, women's perspectives of men's marriageability have been hinged on men's ability to achieve an equal or higher SES standing as the woman they wish to pursue. This perspective supports the practice of Black women's reluctance to "marry down."

Professional Black women measure men's eligibility based on their ability to be either self-sustained or match their successes. Thus, due to the imbalance of educated Black women to Black men, highly educated Black women face the highest shortage of marriageable men regarding compatibility in socioeconomic status (Bennett et al. 1992; Schoen and Kluegel 1988; South and Lloyd 1992). However, this is not unique to Black women—social scientists have consented that Black women's desire in a man is consistent with other western women, meaning Black women want potential mates to be physically attractive, financially stable, and well-educated (Edin 2000; Johnson and Staples 2004; Staples 1987).

Additionally, traditional forms of patriarchal-based marriages place Black men in the role of the provider. Both men and women ascribe or endorse Black men to fill the provider role in romantic relationships and centering their ability to fulfill that duty as a measurement of their marriageability (Johnson and Loscocco 2015; King and Allen 2009b). Thus, many Black men choose not to marry until they feel they can successfully fulfill the role as a provider (Johnson and Loscocco 2015). To understand marriage rates and its relationship to Black marriageability, studies must focus on continuing to explore Black men's views on marriageability and marriage practices.

Much of the literature on Black men's marriageability focuses on the relationship of unemployed and lower educated Black men to Black women. At the same time, Black men's marriageability is defined in two ways: a patriarchal notion of provision and the ability to match or raise a woman's class or SES status. However, there is limited literature regarding understandings of marriageability among Black men with higher levels of education and income. I address this by investigating how Black men pursuing graduate degrees understand

marriageability given their educational achievements and their anticipated income and occupational outcomes.

Data and Methods

This research was approved through the University of Arkansas's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Due to Covid-19, all of the interviews were conducted via Zoom and were audio and video recorded. The first interviews were conducted in September 2020. I solicited 11 Black men in graduate or professional studies programs from across the United States through a targeted sample. The men were recruited through convenience and snowball (Watters and Biernacki 1989) sampling methods. Electronic flyers were placed in different technological spaces, such as GroupMe group chats and LinkedIn groups that contained a large population of Black graduate men.

The semi-structured interviews were approximately 30 minutes to an hour. The semi-structured nature of interviews allowed the participants to openly construct and express their thoughts and ideas. This allowed them to create their own individual framing and meanings to the question(s) asked of them either at the moment while also allowing them to revisit the question later if they wished. During the interviews, I asked the men to discuss their ideas surrounding a Marriageable Man. Specifically, when asked about the term *Marriageable Man*, participants were asked to think about the term through three questions: 1) What does *Marriageable Man* mean to you? 2) Do you think you are a *Marriageable man*? Why or why not? 3) How does one become a *Marriageable Man*? Following the interviews, the participants were provided with a sociodemographic questionnaire to be completed through their email. The sociodemographic questionnaire's purpose was to gather additional information about the sample (age, class status, education level, the degree they are pursuing, family origin).

Sample

All of the men I interviewed were in graduate-level standings at an accredited U.S. institution. Out of my eleven participants, ten were millennials between the ages of 22-38. All were provided a pseudonym of their choice for confidentiality. I asked each to describe their class backgrounds. Five identified as a working-middle class, two as working class, two as upper-middle-class, one as middle class, and one as poor. With regards to household make-up, seven grew up in a two-parent home. Two came from a mother-only household. One noted he came from a home with joint custody and another from an extended family household. I also asked about parents' education, and five of the participants' parents had received a Master's or higher education. Four reported some college or Bachelor's degrees. Two reported that their parents had some high school and or elementary. Five noted that religion had an extreme influence on their upbringings, and six reported that religion did not influence their upbringing. Four attended a private institution, and seven attended a public school. Six were in a PhD program, three were in a master's program, one attended law school, and one attended medical school.

On paper, these men were eligible and marriageable. The interviewed men were socially mobile through their educational attainment, of marriageable age, single (two are currently in relationships but not married), and potential middle to high earners. It is also noteworthy that I, the researcher, align directly with this sample. Being that I was single and in graduate school during our interviews, these men would be considered my peers.

The coding process was themed and done by hand. The codes were also informed by the participants, and their responses were influenced by their presentation of information through their everyday language (Sandelowski 2000).

Results and Discussion

Each participant spoke to the research questions noted above from an orientation toward the future. Although two men are currently in significant relationships, they all see themselves deferring marriage while being focused on their education and their desire to be self-sustained. Thus, while each are in limbo, so to speak, they nonetheless drew upon their understanding of both cultural (shared goals, maturity, connection) and structural conditions (education and financial viability) to project on the topic of marriage.

The participants of this study discussed their various understandings and conceptions of a *Marriageable Man*. Being a *Marriageable Man* was described as someone being able to exemplify financial security, self-sustained, and to possess mature characteristics. Men who are socially mobile are still concerned or connect marriageability with their financial stability but also express concerns about being self-sustained, mature, and for most, the ability to provide for a family. The findings suggest that educated Black men conceptualize their own understanding of marriageability and how they may be perceived as eligible or marriageable men.

Perspective 1: A Marriageable Man is a Self-Sustained

Some of the men I spoke with based their conceptualization of a *Marriageable man* on one's ability to achieve status or a level of achievement that would prove his ability to provide for someone else or himself. Many of the men discussed deferring marriage plans or goals to finish their educational careers and achieve the status of being self-sustained. For instance, Raymond envisioned a *Marriageable Man* to be based on his ability to achieve self-sustainability. Raymond stated:

I think that it means the man who is well-prepared to serve in a role or to be a part of a partnership in a role. So that means that he lives a sustainable lifestyle. So that means he has an income. He has an income that he completely is independent of themselves financially. He is less dependent on others as it

pertains to things that got his life, where he lives, where he works, how much he earns, things like that. Sustainability is the major thing for me. (Interview with Raymond 9.30.2020).

Raymond's understanding of a *Marriageable Man* situated his ability to provide and practice self-sustainability and independence. When asked if he was a marriageable man, Raymond continued to define marriageability by a man's ability to provide. Raymond added:

I think that I am, especially considering the fact that to me, marriageable is ... At least when I interpret that question, it comes from the other person's perspective. So I'm financially independent. I'm gainfully employed. I'm focused on my career. A part of a community, a part of different groups. So yes, I am of age. So I've experienced some things in life. I'm responsible. (Interview with Raymond 9.30.2020).

Raymond is actively measuring himself through achieved merits that would ascend him—in his eyes—as a *Marriageable Man*. Like Raymond, Keith conceptualizes his eligibility to the *Marriageable Man* status through his accomplishments, but for Keith, it does not include being a provider but rather an equal. Keith explained:

If I'm going to be someone's marriageable man I'm almost to my degree, I've already got two degrees, right? I always forget about the master's. I already have two degrees. I'm working on this third. I have job prospects. That means a certain salary, that means certain benefits, that means ... I don't want to say provider, but at the very least, I can provide for myself so you don't have to be taking care of me. (Interview with Keith 9.16.2020).

Keith aligned his marriageability with his educational achievements, allowing him to earn an income to sustain himself. Where Raymond and Keith see their eligibility, Maxwell uses the same method of measuring his productivity and current financial outcomes to understand himself as ineligible to be considered as a *Marriageable Man*. Maxwell remarked:

At this point right now? No. So why not? I am broke. Am I broke? I mean, I do make a little bit of money, but not nearly as much to cover a household or cover

myself and another person, or even support a family of people, whether that be actual little humans, whether that be dogs or whatever pet. I can't. I'm not prepared for that. I'm young. (Interview with Maxwell 9.12.2020).

Literature on traditional marriage models and marriageability often discusses men's roles based on their ability to provide for a family (King and Allen 2009b; Wilson 1987). Literature suggests that the notion of being a provider creates anxiety to be married for men. Thus men are postponing marriage due to their believed inability to provide (Johnson and Loscocco 2015; King and Allen 2009b). Findings from this study, in part, have been consistent with such literature. In other words, in explaining their ideas of what makes a marriageable man, the men discussed the ability to be self-sustainable. Being self-sustainable was seen as a gateway or prerequisite to eventually being able to be the primary provider within the family for most of the participants. Being self-sustainable was often based on completed educational success and future income and career expectations.

Perspective 2: A Marriageable Man Posses Positive Characteristics and a Willingness to Grow

Others viewed the term *Marriageable Man* and those eligible to be considered a *Marriageable Man* outside the boundaries of income and financial security as a singular measurement of marriageability. Some men viewed personal qualities and characteristics as a valid measurement for being a *Marriageable Man*. Quincy, an early Medical student, understands being marriageable as involving consistent practicing docility that creates comfort for prospective mates or partners. Quincy expressed:

I think it basically means you're not like an F boy, player, I guess, you're not seen as a threat or dangerous to a woman to the point where they can find that comfort in you. I think it also means, one verb or adjective I would use for that would be docile, because I think that it requires a man to kind of honestly calm down (Interview with Quincy 9.25.2020).

We see Quincy measures man's marriageability on their ability to be or present a form of docility. For Quincy a docile characteristic presents a less threatening space to a woman due to a man's ability to control himself and his desires. Jones also speaks to being marriageable as maturity embedded in responsibility and unselfishness. Jones explained:

...a marriageable man is at the very end of the day communicative, unselfish, and emotionally healthy. Because when you bring unidentified trauma or unresolved trauma from childhood, teenage-hood, young adulthood, whatever the case may be, when you bring that into a marriage all of that's going to manifest whether you want it to or not (Interview with Jones 9.18.2020).

Jones understands a *Marriageable Man's* maturity involves a solid knowledge of the self and the ability to communicate and foster a healthy relationship between him and his partner. Jones, who is currently in a long-term relationship, values healthy relationships and exhibiting a willingness to learn healthy relationship practices was vital to being a *Marriageable Man*.

Others who were not in a relationship also envisioned a *Marriageable Man* to exemplify maturity through a willingness to mature and grow within a marriage. Moses discussed this when he stated:

Marriageable man is a man that a person seems deemable to spend a life with, to be able to go through the hurdles, the good and the bad, not necessarily the perfect ideal spouse, but the man that they see that they can go through life with, they can evolve as the person, they can evolve with situations, they can bounce back, they can go through everything that life challenges them with. There's not this ideal of being the perfect person or the perfect thing, but basically it's they trust that individual to be able to live the course of what life brings (Interview with Moses 9.23.2020).

For Moses, a *Marriageable Man* is willing to put the work in to grow within the marriage and individually. Other participants shared sentiments of growth being essential to fostering healthy relationships and marriages. Like Moses, Zane speaks explicitly about understanding the importance of growth to be marriageable. Zane expressed:

This is good because I think I've been interrogating where I need to be "marriageable." But I think for me to get to where I feel like I'm ready to be in a real relationship, in a stable relationship, that I will... You know what I'm saying? I have different communication skills. By different I mean different than how I talk right now, which as reported by my mom and some female friends and some exes is sort of aggressive. And so I think me being in a marriageable space is me being able to know how to talk a bit kinder, a bit nicer and still be truthful. I've been interrogating for a while now what that space means for me. I feel like I'm balancing that a lot better than I was years ago. But it still needs refinement (Interview with Zane 9.30.2020).

Zane's interrogation of himself highlights the importance of being willing to learn and experience growth and having people around to help him understand what it may take to be a *Marriageable Man*. Both Moses and Zane understanding growth to be a process that is essential in a marriage.

The men also were imagining a *Marriageable Man* to specifically be willing and able to grow within a relationship or marriage. Men described being in situations where they experienced or were forced to grow due to their romantic relationships and non-romantic relationships with women. More contemporary models have been described to focus on outcomes that foster healthy marriage goals alongside individual expectations such as love, romance, growth (Coontz 2006). Findings with this study describe men envisioning a *Marriageable Man* to be able to ascribe to newer models. Alongside being self-sustainable, the men imagined a *Marriageable Man* to be mature enough to support and or be a foundation within a healthy relationship. Consistent with the literature regarding attitudes for desired partner characteristics. King and Allen (2009) found that a significant percentage of Black men and women imagine their ideal partner to be "reliable, monogamous, affectionate, financially stable, and African American" (pg. 583). They also note that honesty and sensitivity were signified as the essential characteristics.

Marriageability and Queerness.

Three of the participants identified themselves as Gay or Queer, which presented some unique alternative understandings than the rest of men when conceptualizing *Marriageable Man* and their potential roles within a marriage. Keith spoke explicitly about his Queerness and how it shifts his understandings of his marriageability from a traditional and patriarchal provider in marriage. Keith conveyed:

I don't know if it's because I'm queer but just have never had any sort of long term thoughts about me being a breadwinner or provider especially in the realm of marriage. Maybe in the family of course I think of myself as a provider to my future children and then I think my graduate degree if we're assuming that the person I'm with won't have a graduate degree and so that means I might have better prospects than they might have. Then maybe I think of myself as primary provider to my future children but I've just never thought of myself or envisioned myself being a primary provider to or for my eventual partner. I've just always assumed or presumed rather that they would be able to provide for themselves... (Interview with Keith 9.16.2020).

Keith also recalls seeing models of provision with Black families and spaces that presented alternative models of provisions. Keith continued:

I remember growing up around, so all my family, all my friends ... I grew up in a majority black city so everyone I knew was black. Thinking about my own family. I know that there is this male ego/male pride that makes people want to be providers but the reality for a lot of black people is that's just not the case. Usually it's the women who are providers so I think even that racialization growing up, I've just never envisioned myself as having to be a provider. If anything, I've always come into it with the idea that both partners or both parents or whatever have an equal amount of weight to pull (Interview with Keith 9.16.2020).

As understood in marriage literature, men often fill the role of the provider. However, Keith's experiences offer an alternative model and practice by identifying women as providers, which relieved him of burdening him to always see himself as a future provider. Like Keith, Maxell also thinks about is sexuality in correlation with marriage models. He says:

I don't think about marriage. One of the reasons why I don't think about marriage is I am a black gay man. And so a lot of states, depending on where I end up after here, have marriage laws that kind of forbid me from getting married. And so it's a little dicey that way. Too, the institution of marriage itself is just a bit ... how can I put this? It locks you in a certain place. (Interview with Maxwell 9.12.2020).

It is also noteworthy that Maxwell rejects marriage, in part, because of the constraints on gay marriage. Although both Maxwell and Keith conceptualize the term *Marriageable Man* in somewhat similar ways to the other participants, they mention their sexuality has presented them with alternative perspectives than heterosexual practices of marriage and marriageability. Along with the other participants, Keith and Maxwell adds more awareness to educated Black men and their varied understandings of marriage practices and marriageability.

Conclusion

This project explored how socially mobile Black men (exemplified by graduate-level standings) conceptualize a *Marriageable Man*. Findings found that the men imagined a *Marriageable Man* through three specific perspectives. The first perspective envisioned a *Marriageable Man* to be self-sustainable. This perspective focused on a Man's ability to show that he has the means to eventually (if not already) be able to support a family is an implicit understanding of the more traditional social and structural expectations for men in marriage. Whereas the first perspective is grounded in the structural and social expectations, the second perspective highlighted the more interpersonal understanding of *Marriageable Man*, to be mature enough to support and maintain a healthy relationship. Alongside being mature, in the third perspective, the men were picturing a *Marriageable Man* to being willing to grow.

Additionally, there was a discussion of marriageability and marriage *definitions* and practices being conceptualized through sexual orientation. Three participants identified themselves to be Gay or Queer. They offered perspectives of marriageability not being

specifically tied to men being breadwinners within a marriage. Simultaneously there was discussion of how marriage presents a constraint to gay men. For example, local laws and being tied to traditional understandings of provider roles were constraints given. Further research could examine and compare the challenges and effects of *Marriageable Man* in relationship to sexual orientation.

My research contributes to marriageability studies by highlighting Black men's voices who are socially and educationally mobile. Focusing on this group provides insight into the perspectives of those looking toward the future of marriage based upon their current social location. Knowing eligible and marriageable men's attitudes of marriageability and marriageability requirements is essential to understanding current marriage choices, ideals and both cultural and structural opportunities and constraints.

Literature has not focused on socially mobile Black men and their perspectives on marriage and marriageability. Assumptions for these men are made through sex-ratio discourse, Black women's perspectives, or they are overshadowed by perspectives of married, working-class, or divorced men. However, as potential and eligible practitioners of traditional, current, and future Black marriage models and practices, their perspectives are essential to understanding current and future marriage practices both within Black spaces and in conversation with larger U.S. marriage practices.

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Appendix



To: Gabriel Etienne Evans
BELL 4188

From: Douglas James Adams, Chair
IRB Expedited Review

Date: 06/25/2020

Action: **Exemption Granted**

Action Date: 06/25/2020

Protocol #: 2005266301

Study Title: Black men, Social Mobility and Romance

The above-referenced protocol has been determined to be exempt.

If you wish to make any modifications in the approved protocol that may affect the level of risk to your participants, you must seek approval prior to implementing those changes. All modifications must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have any questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact the IRB Coordinator at 109 MLKG Building, 5-2208, or irb@uark.edu.

cc: Brandon A Jackson, Investigator