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Patricia Dixon

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AARMS: The African American Relationships and Marriage Strengthening Curriculum for African American Relationships Courses and Programs

Patricia Dixon

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Abstract African American Relationships and Marriage Strengthening (AARMS), a curriculum that consists of 10 core areas, was developed to be used for relationships, premarital, and marriage education courses and programs. This paper provides an overview of the rationale for each component of the AARMS curriculum, with the specific goal of providing a framework and strategies for developing an African American relationships course that can be taught at the university or college level or for relationship, premarital, or marriage education for community and faith-based organizations.

Keywords African American relationships curriculum · African American curriculum · African American relationships · African American relationships education · African American premarital and marital education

Concerns over the increasing divorce and decreasing marriage rates in the USA has lead to an increase in interest in premarital and marriage education over the past couple of decades. These concerns led to a grassroots marriage movement made up of scholars, marriage counselors and educators, policy makers, clergy, social service providers, community leaders, and lay persons. The marriage movement culminated in 2000 with the signing of a marriage principle statement by 113 supporters. In February 2006, President George W. Bush signed the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005, which reauthorized the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program. Included in this legislation was \$150 million for marriage education and fatherhood programs. In 2006, 226 marriage education and fatherhood programs were funded with approximately \$150 million over a 5-year period (US Department of Health and Human Services, *n. d.*). In 2010, 120 marriage education and fatherhood programs were funded with \$150 million dollars over a 3-year period (US Department of Health and Human

P. Dixon (✉)
Department of African American Studies, Georgia State University,
P.O. Box 4109, Atlanta, GA 30302-4109, USA
e-mail: patdixon1@comcast.net

Services 2011). In response to this, a plethora of premarital and marriage education curricula and programs have emerged to prepare couples for marriage and help strengthen the union of those who are already married.

African Americans as a group are less likely to marry and more likely to divorce (US Census Bureau 2012a). Therefore, they are especially in need of premarital and marriage education. There are numerous premarital and marriage-education curricula and programs, but there is a dearth of those designed specifically for African Americans. Although some are being adapted for diverse racial and ethnic groups—for example, the Prevention and Relationship Preparation Program—they are typically one dimensional; that is, they are focused primarily on one component of the marital relationship, such as communication and conflict resolution, or they lack cultural sensitivity toward these groups, especially African Americans. Historical and cultural components are usually added as a by-product, rather than constituting the core upon which the curriculum or program is developed.

The African American Relationships and Marriage Strengthening curriculum (AARMS; Dixon) began with the development of an African American male–female relationships course taught at a Southeastern university. The course initially used the textbook *Choices in Relationships* by Donald Knox and Caroline Schacht (2013) for general information on marriage and family and Sonbonfu Somé's book, *The Spirit of Intimacy* (1999) for an African-centered perspective on relationships and marriage, along with other sources, such as journal articles and book chapters focusing specifically on African Americans. These additional sources culminated in the textbook *African American Relationships, Marriages and Families: An Introduction* which is now being used along with Knox and Schacht's and Somé's texts for this college-level course. The AARMS curriculum consists of both the textbook and a facilitator guide, organized around these 10 core areas: (1) gender; (2) love, attachment, and life cycle changes; (3) African American women; (4) African American men; (5) dating and choosing a partner; (6) sexuality; (7) communication and conflict resolution; (8) diet; (9) finances; and (10) spirituality. The textbook begins by providing a historical and cultural background and at the end of each chapter, there are exercises to help individuals and couples increase self- and partner awareness in each of these areas.

Undergirding the AARMS approach is the principle that both micro and macro factors need to be included in relationship, premarital, and marriage education for African Americans. At the macro level is the role that broader sociohistorical and cultural factors play in shaping African American relationships, marriages, and families. At the micro level is the idea that people are shaped by their experiences in their families; with teachers, friends, and associates; in communities; and in relationships with intimate others. These experiences are also influenced by experiences in the broader culture and play a role in how people view and approach the world and shape how they think and feel about themselves, potential partners, and life in general; the expectations they have of themselves and potential partners; and ultimately how they interact in relationships.

The AARMS curriculum was developed to be used for relationships, premarital, and marriage education courses and programs. The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the rationale for each component of the AARMS curriculum, with the specific goal of providing a framework and strategy for developing an African American relationships course that can be taught at the university or college level or

for relationship, premarital, or marriage education for community and faith-based organizations. Since the AARMS curriculum only includes the 10 core areas outlined above, this paper also provides strategies for incorporating other important components in an African American relationships course.

Sociohistorical Backdrop

To develop an African American relationships course, what must first be considered is the profound impact of broader sociohistorical and economic factors on the reality of those who desire to marry or are already married. It is important to understand how these factors play out in whether African Americans are able to marry—that is, whether there are proportionately enough desirable partners (particularly for women) to choose from, how the genders view themselves and the opposite sex, and how they interact in relationships. Although African Americans have similar challenges to those of couples of other racial and ethnic groups, they share experiences that may also be quite different. This is primarily because they share a history that is different from other groups in US society. African Americans are the only group that came to the USA involuntarily and experienced 250 years of slavery, torture, terrorization, segregation, and institutional racism, referred to as the Great Mifafa (disaster). Because of these different sociohistorical experiences, there are variables that may linger in the realities of the lives of African Americans, and those may subsequently affect the formation or non-formation of relationships that can lead to marriage. These variables also persist once African Americans marry and may affect their ability to remain married.

Racial oppression today may not be as blatant as in the past, but it still permeates US society in various forms and in subtle ways, whether intentional or unintentional, as in the case of institutional racism. Race intrudes into all sectors of US society, particularly the economic sector, putting a disproportionate number of African Americans at the low end of the socioeconomic scale. This places African Americans in a double stratification of race and class, in a caste-like minority. Race juxtaposed with class creates peculiar gender dynamics for African American males and females in relationship to US social and economic institutions, and has consequences for their relationships, marriages, and families. This interplay of race, class, and gender puts African Americans at a distinct disadvantage and has serious implications for their ability to form healthy relationships that can lead to and help sustain a healthy marriage. An educational program must start with these sociohistorical factors and must incorporate these factors at the core in the development of the curriculum components.

Although it is necessary to incorporate African American sociohistorical experiences in the USA, in curriculum design, it is also critical to begin the historical component of the course with the African presence in the world, reaching back to the great Egyptian dynasties, through the great West African societies. Establishing a historical and cultural reference point prior to African Americans' experiences in the Great Mifafa is critical in order to not only present history that is accurate, but to show African contributions to the world and to demonstrate the importance of creating and maintaining strong and stable families and communities to reach such greatness. The film *The Great and Mighty Walk*, a documentary that details great African civilizations to the period of enslavement, is a good starting point.

Culture

This component of the AARMS curriculum provides an overview of cultural factors that shape African American relationships, marriages, and families. It includes the theoretical approaches that have been used to study and understand African American families, with particular focus on African cultural retentions. It looks at how changing cultural trends are affecting African American marriage rates and at other factors affecting African American marriages and families, including globalization, social policies, the prison industry, materialism, sexism, and acculturation into cultural values and ideas of US society.

Although African Americans have been in the USA for close to 400 years, they still retain cultural ideas and values of their West African ancestors, making them a bicultural group. Many therefore may experience what W. E. B. Du Bois over a century ago referred to as “double consciousness,” that is, being torn between values retained from their African ancestry and those of US society.

When addressing culture, it is important to start with a comprehensive definition, examine characteristics of traditional African culture and US culture, and then compare and contrast how these cultural differences may manifest in African American personal, relationship, and marriage and family life.

Wade Nobles' (1974) definition is good starting point. He divides culture into two levels: *deep structure* and *surface structure*. Deep structure is further divided into *cultural factors* and *cultural aspects*, and surface structure includes *cultural manifestations*. Cultural factors include cosmology (peoples' ideas about the origins of the universe), axiology (what is good or right with relationships), and ontology (the nature of being). Cultural aspects include ideology (direction for solving social problems), worldview (comprehensive ideas about order and ethos), and cultural tone, style, or mode of being. Cultural manifestations are the behaviors, ideas, values, and overt daily activities that manifest from deep structure.

At the deep structure level of culture, for traditional Africa, spirituality is the basis of all existence. Underlying that this is the idea that a supreme and omnipotent being created, manifests, and governs everything—all animate beings and inanimate objects—and because of this, everything is connected through spirit. It is the connection through spirit that is the basis of cultural aspects and the organizing principle of all life and living, social institutions including marriages and families, and cultural manifestations such as ideas, values, and beliefs (Nobles 1974). Like their West African ancestors, spirituality may still be at the core of African Americans' lives and by extension their marriages and families, regardless of their religious orientation or practice, although spirituality may be becoming less important as African Americans become more assimilated into US cultural values.

For cultural aspects, the second level of deep structure, the prevailing ideologies that undergird all US economic, political, and social institutions, including marriage and family, are survival of the fittest, individualism, materialism, competition, and patriarchy. These ideologies are directly opposed to ideologies of spiritualism, survival of the group, and collective responsibility or cooperativeness underlying surface-structure cultural manifestations characteristic of traditional African values and in many instances, those of African Americans.

Such stark differences at the deep structure level of culture may lead to cultural strain or “double consciousness” as indicated previously, as African Americans attempt to navigate

cultural manifestations such as ideas, values, and beliefs, and overt daily activities and expressions of culture in their personal lives and interpersonal relationships.

With respect to family, there are three fundamental differences between African and by extension, African American and US family structure and functioning that need to be considered. First, for traditional Africa, family is central to the life of the people (Mbiti 1990; Nobles 1974; Sudarkasa 1997, 2007). Second, the African family is organized around consanguineal or blood ties, as opposed to the conjugal or marital tie that characterizes US ideology (Sudarkasa 1997, 2007). The third difference is the significance of the extended family and fictive kin in African relationships, marriage, and family life, versus the nuclear-family ideology of US society. For traditional Africa, everybody is related to everybody and one has an obligation to and sense of responsibility for everybody. With this as a retained value, African Americans may remain connected to and feel a sense of obligation and responsibility toward their family of origin and those who are “like family,” that is, fictive kin. Sudarkasa (1997, 2007) also identifies “Seven R’s” as African retentions in African American family life: Respect, Responsibility, Restraint, Reciprocity, Reverence, Reason, and Reconciliation. Nobles (1974) notes responsibility for elder and child care as a core value in African American family life.

Factors to Consider

- Breaking up before marriage, not marrying, or divorcing may not be as difficult with strong social ties to family of origin—this may affect marriage and divorce rates (Sudarkasa 1997, 2007).
- Individuals may be torn between the primacy of the blood tie and the US cultural norm of the primacy of the marital tie, putting strain on relationships and marriages (Sudarkasa 1997, 2007).
- Partners might have different ideas and values about the role of family in one's relationship, marriage, and family life, and the sharing of resources such as time and money with families of origin.

The course might incorporate information and exercises that encourage singles and couples to explore their ideas and values at both deep- and surface-structure levels; their ideas and values regarding the role of family of origin in their relationship, marriage, and family life; how different values play out in their interactions; and how to navigate competing and opposing values. The course might also include helping participants develop strategies for incorporating extended family and community as a support system in their relationship, marriage, and family life. In addition, those who enroll in the course might be encouraged to utilize the family and community members—particularly the wisdom of elders—as a resource for strengthening themselves and their relationships, marriages, and families.

Gender Roles

Gender roles may be one of the most significant factors that affect African American intimate relationships. Since the enslavement of African Americans, their gender-role

dynamics have been the opposite of the gender-role ideology of US society, which is fundamentally that the male is the provider and protector and the female is the nurturer. During slavery, since it was the female–child dyad that was most important for the reproduction of enslaved African Americans as units of labor, the male was rendered powerless in the capacities of provider and protector. White male slaveholders had complete control over the household and the resources that it received, and when those resources were provided to the household, it was often done through the female.

Although these were the gender-role dynamics, African American males and females worked side by side in the cotton fields and thus shared equality in the labor they performed, which may have carried over to their family life. In fact, scholars (Davis 1983) have noted that because of this, African American families may be the first egalitarian families in the USA.

During the great migration to the North at the beginning of the twentieth century, the power that African American women held in their families persisted as they were able to find work as domestics more readily than African American men were able to find seasonal and outside work. During World War II, the roles began to shift as African American men participated in the war effort and were able to provide for their families. However, this was short-lived, as job opportunities for both African American males and females declined after World War II. In the decades that followed, the role reversal continued, and issues that men and women may have been experiencing were exacerbated with the rise in media depictions of the ideal family and the matriarchal thesis that emerged in the 1960s with the Moynihan report (1965), blaming the failure of Black communities, families, and children on the unusual power that Black women wield in their families, leaving Black men psychologically emasculated.

As welfare roles increased during the economic decline in the 1970s and 1980s, the gender-role reversal continued. With increasing economic globalization, jobs performed by African American men were moved to foreign markets. At the same time, there was an increase in low-paying service-sector jobs that women typically do, so that the gender-role ideology still persisted throughout the 1990s and into early 2000s. The economic downturn from the mid 2000s to the present time has further reinforced the gender-role reversal that started during the period of enslavement. Gender-role reversal juxtaposed with the “prince charming” idea—the notion that men rescue and take care of women—that pervades throughout US culture can exacerbate already existing conflict around gender roles.

Another factor to consider in African American heterosexual relationships is the cultural practice whereby African American mothers raise their daughters and love their sons, or rather empower their daughters and enable their sons. This can play a significant role in how males and females develop and the expectations they have of each other. Lack of understanding of how differential child-rearing practices, whether by mothers or fathers, affect development can lead to misunderstandings and power struggles.

In spite of some of the issues around gender dynamics in African American relationships, marriages, and families, research has identified adaptable gender roles as strength of African American families (Hill 1999). A course might:

- Provide a historical backdrop of gender dynamics, starting with slavery in the USA and the African American family. This can be insightful for African American singles and couples and can lead to increased awareness and understanding.

- Challenge participants to rethink US gender-role ideology.
- Encourage participants to explore gender dynamics in their family of origin, how they feel about them, and how these feelings play out in their expectations and the roles they are willing and able to perform.
- Incorporate the strength of adaptable roles and the ancient African Egyptian principle of *Maat*, which emphasizes harmony, balance, and justice as guiding principles for gender roles.

Love

The primary approach to love in the US is romantic love. This is in stark contrast to the traditional African approach, in which love is expected to develop after marriage through couples sharing their lives together. Partners in traditional Africa are chosen based on their values, health, and family background and in Africa and throughout the world, family played a crucial role in selecting partners for their children, marriages were arranged, and a dowry or bride price might be paid. Romantic love did not emerge until around the twelfth century in Europe with courtly love between a knight and a woman of high status who he could not have. Choosing partners according to gender-based skills such as domestic and provider roles was prevalent in early US society, prior to the proliferation of romantic love as the basis for mate selection. Although romantic love is the primary approach to love in the USA, researchers identify approaches to love that range from romantic to realistic (Knox and Schacht 2013).

How one loves, that is, one's love style, may have to do with early attachment experiences with parents or caregivers, previous experiences in intimate and other relationships, and gender differences in expressions of love. These experiences may impact affection needs, attachment style, expectations, and how one expresses love. What may be of particular significance in a course on relationships and marriage, is that the majority of African American children—approximately 58 %—are raised in single-parent homes and close to 50 % are raised by their mothers only (US Census Bureau 2012b). This may mean that many adults have been raised without their fathers. Although “other” fathers from extended family may fill in for absent fathers, changing trends, whereby families are relying less on extended family, may result in diminishing assistance, although the mother's boyfriend might step in. In addition, a missing biological father may still affect a child even though there is the presence of an “other” father. In instances in which there is little or no assistance from extended family, this may mean that mothers, experiencing role strain, may not be able to show both instrumental and expressive love in balanced and healthy ways. This and father absence may not only have gender-specific outcomes for both genders' ability to attach in healthy ways, but may result in unresolved issues with trust and love. Those issues may show up in how the genders attach and interact and the expectations they have of each other; for example, females expecting male partners to provide what a missing father did not, or both genders not knowing how to interact with the opposite sex in healthy ways because there were no examples of this in childhood. It should also be noted that unresolved attachment and developmental issues at early stages of the life cycle can affect how one continues to progress through it, which could have further implications for individuals and couples.

The relationship and marriage course might provide information about some of the nuances of race- and gender-specific issues around love in African American families and incorporate exercises for singles and couples to explore differences in early experiences with parents and caregivers, love and attachment styles, and unresolved issues around trust and love and to learn to have empathy for their respective experiences.

African American Men and Women

Many factors impact African American women and how they interact in relationships. These include the stereotype of their being mammies and matriarchs, fatherlessness, under- and unemployment, role strain, the shortage of males and potentially not being able to find an emotionally and financially stable male to marry, cultural acceptance of male infidelity, loss of partners through premature death and incarceration, and child loss, especially of boys to violence. In addition, the prevalent Caucasian standard of beauty with respect to hair, color, and body type and size adversely affect how African American women feel about themselves and their ability to form and maintain healthy relationships and marriages.

African American males are equally adversely affected by factors that leave them feeling pain and anger and lessen their ability to form and maintain healthy relationships and marriages. These include stereotypes of their being violent and a menace to society, racial profiling, under- and unemployment, high levels of incarceration, child support payments in the face of economic hardship, fatherlessness, and premature death. A relationship course might provide the opportunity for both males and females to explore their anxieties, fears, pain, and anger around their race- and gender-specific issues and exercises to help them increase understanding and empathy around these issues.

Dating and Choosing a Partner

The values of materialism, individualism, competition, and patriarchy underlying dating and mating and scarce resources have a profound impact on the ability of African Americans to date and mate in healthy ways. Karenga (2013) identifies capitalism, racism, and sexism as ideological values that transform African American relationships into what he terms “connections”—that is, cash, flesh, force, and dependency—which sets the basis for African Americans to use and misuse each other's resources and bodies. Scott and Stewart (2013) also identify three poisons in the pot of life—institutional deprivation, subsidization, and decimation and killing of African American males—that affect the quality of African American relationships.

A relationship and marriage course might incorporate strategies for dating and choosing a partner and exercises to help singles and couples prioritize characteristics that are important in choosing a partner, and explore various levels of physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, and social compatibility.

Sexuality

US society suffers from a type of “sexual schizophrenia”: it perpetuates conservative values around sexuality on the one hand, but is very liberal on the other hand, as is evident in the proliferation of sexual images and behaviors, particularly in mass media. There is also a double standard that gives men permission to explore their sexuality and encourages women to repress theirs. Such double standards and mixed messages set the stage for confusion and conflict around sexual values and behaviors.

Stereotypes of African Americans being hypersexed have been perpetuated since the period of slavery. For African American males, the myth of their having large genitals led to their being set up on some plantations as studs, stallions, and breeders. These myths still prevail and could have implications for how men feel about themselves, especially if they do not fulfill the stereotypes and myths. After slavery, the stereotype of African American men as rapists was used to justify lynchings and to prevent them from engaging in sexual relationships with white women.

The stereotype of African women as “hot, lusty temptresses” or “Jezebels” was used to justify their sexual exploitation by slaveholders. These stereotypes are still perpetuated in subtle and blatant forms throughout the US media and have even become prevalent in hip-hop creative productions by African Americans themselves. These stereotypes can have a deadening affect on African American sexuality, especially for women, making them reluctant to explore the range of sexual behaviors that can lead to a satisfying sex life. Women may fear being referred to by some of the negative epithets used to describe African American female sexuality, such as “freaks,” “hos,” “hoochies,” “hoochie mamas,” “chicken heads,” and so on. African Americans are also plagued by cultural silence—not “airing our dirty laundry”—which might conceal sexual abuse in their families of origin.

A relationship and marriage course might incorporate exercises to help individuals and couples explore how race-specific factors play out in their sexual interaction in addition to allowing exploration of sexual values, behaviors, expectations, and how to enhance their sex life.

Communication and Conflict Resolution

The AARMS program includes TLC: Talking and Listening With Care: A Communication Guide for Singles and Couples (Dixon 2002), a culturally centered communication guide for African Americans. TLC focuses on African ideology of the power of words, fundamentals of effective talking and listening, communication and connection, processing styles, gender differences in communication, and African American communication styles. The TLC program consists of the three Cs of caring, the Expanded Self or WEUSI concept, and strategies for Talking and Listening with Care.

Cultural-specific factors to consider for African Americans include that African American women are labeled as the angry, bitter Sapphire stereotype who emasculates men when she expresses her frustration and pain, and African American men, because of fear of showing their pain and vulnerability, may have difficulty communicating at

all. As indicated previously, many African Americans are raised in single-parent homes, which may mean that they have no models for how couples can communicate and resolve conflict in healthy ways. The goal is to help couples explore their parent and early caregiver communication and conflict resolution styles and how those experiences may affect their own communication style and to learn skills to communicate and resolve conflict in ways that are healthy and affirming. These goals can be achieved by:

- Incorporating the Seven R's as a guide for communication, conflict resolution, and reconciliation.
- Facilitating single-gender sessions to allow men and women to vent their frustration and feelings of pain and anger without having to feel vulnerable in front of the opposite sex and without the fear of hurting each other's feelings.
- Teaching couples how to communicate and resolve conflict using the TLC program.

Financial Literacy

Marginalization in the opportunity structure, where African Americans are the last hired and first fired, can put tremendous stress on African American relationships, marriages, and families, while lack of financial literacy can exacerbate that stress. Providing information on employment, the economic status of African Americans as a group, and the spending patterns of African Americans by comparison to other racial and ethnic groups can provide a realistic picture of their socioeconomic status. Useful exercises help individuals and couples explore values and patterns in their families of origin and how those play out in their own relationship with money, their similar and different values around money (what money means to them), and their spending patterns and habits. In addition, since African Americans are under- and unemployed, course participants need to learn financial literacy (such as budgeting and financial planning) and explore alternative ways to earn a living and build wealth.

Nutrition and Health

The soul-food diet is high in saturated fats and refined sugar. The majority of African Americans live in or around urban areas that are lined with fast-food restaurants. Health problems can detract from the health of a relationship or marriage because they are stressful and can be emotionally and financially draining. A course might incorporate the history of soul food, African nutrition and health practices prior to slavery, and holistic nutrition and health, including how to prepare healthy soul food.

Marriage

Although the AARMS program does not include a chapter on marriage, it is important to include information on marriage. John Gottman and Nan Silver's *Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* (2000), Knox and Schacht's chapter on marriage, and

chapters from Sonbonfu Somé's *Spirit of Intimacy* are recommended. Knox and Schacht's chapter on marriage focuses on the reasons that couples marry, changes in the relationship after marriage, and characteristics of a successful marriage. Gottman and Silver's book describes the best practices of married couples and provides exercises to help couples to increase appreciation and fondness for each other. Somé's work focuses on the African approach to marriage, the significance of family and community for marriage support, and rituals for continuous renewal to help keep the marriage healthy and alive.

Spirituality

Spirituality is the core principle upon which the life of the people in traditional African culture was founded. This was also the case in traditional African American culture. In fact, Hill's (1999) research showed religious orientation as a significant strength in African American families. Research shows that couples with a strong religious orientation and strong support from a faith-based community fair better in marriages than those who do not (Knox and Schacht 2013). Although religious orientation had been a strength in their families up until a decade ago, African Americans are increasingly diverse and younger generations may rely less on religion or spirituality for their daily living. This may make them vulnerable to oppressive forces stemming from racial discrimination. A relationship and marriage course might incorporate strategies to help singles and couples become aware of the necessity of nurturing a spiritual life and facilitate couples developing a deeper spiritual life together.

Intimate Partner Violence

Intimate partner violence is prevalent among African American couples, and presents health risks for African American women, children, men, families, and communities. Homicide is the eighth leading cause of death for African Americans (National Center for Health Statistics 2012). Homicide is the fifth leading cause of death for Black men (National Center for Health Statistics 2012), and Black women are four times more likely to be killed than white women (US Department of Justice 2011). While they make up approximately 13 % of the population, African Americans are 47 % of the victims and 52 % of the offenders in homicides and the majority of homicides are committed by intimate partners or family members (US Department of Justice 2011). Early socialization teaching that “men don't cry” may be understood to mean that they are not supposed to show their pain or how vulnerable they feel in the face of all the injustices they experience. As a result, many African American men may not be adept at communicating their vulnerability or pain, and because they do not have control in other areas of their lives, they may use violence as a mechanism to control their relationships, marriages, and families. In addition, men are socialized, particularly by various forms of media in US culture, to respond to adversity through violence. African American women may be unaware of the injustices that men experience and have their own frustration and pain. Because they may not have the skills to express their frustration in healthy ways, they may engage in emotional or verbal abuse.

A relationship and marriage course should incorporate information about the unique experiences of African American men and women and a protocol for addressing intimate partner violence. This component of the course might include information on the causes and dangers of intimate partner violence, how to leave a domestic-violence situation, where to obtain help, shelters for African American women, referrals to organizations that provide Afrocentric therapy for African American men that focuses on their unique experiences, and partnering with community and faith-based organizations that provide these types of information, services, and links, as well as safe havens for African American women experiencing intimate partner violence.

Parenting

Although African American parents share the same concerns for children as other parents, they have additional factors to be concerned about when raising children. For example, McAdoo (2013) examines five central concerns for African American parents: inadequate financial resources, inferior education, the high number of single parents, grandparents as primary caregivers, and racial socialization of children. There are many more factors that affect African American parents and parenting, including African traditions, the slave heritage, conflicting African-centered and U.S. ideas about parenting, raising children in underserved and unsafe communities, multiple fertility, step- and blended families, single parenting, and child support.

Because of the higher age at which African Americans marry, lower marriage rates, and higher divorce rates, many African Americans already have children when entering into relationships and before marrying, leading to higher rates of multiple-fertility families. The course should include such information and allow couples to explore thoughts and feelings around traditional African ideas on parenting, the role of the slave heritage in parenting styles, how to merge US ideas around parenting with traditional African American ideas, and strategies for socializing children with respect to their racial identity and raising them in underserved and unsafe communities. A course might also facilitate couples' learning to utilize the strength of extended families and partner with faith-based and community organizations to provide parenting skills with a specific focus on those for single and multipartner parenting and other resources to assist participants with children.

LGBT Concerns

Although the curriculum was developed as a course for heterosexual relationships, increasingly people enrolling in the course include members of LGBT communities. Although African American members of LGBT communities share challenges similar to those experienced by African American heterosexual singles and couples, they experience additional multiple oppressions with unique additional challenges stemming from their marginalization as they attempt to affirm and integrate their homosexual identity through validation in LGBT and African American communities (Loiaco 2013). The course might include discussions to help increase awareness of LGBT issues and challenges.

Others Factors to Consider

Africans in America are becoming an increasingly diverse group. Those of African descent include continental Africans as well as Caribbean, Puerto Rican, and other ethnic groups who may look African American but do not identify as such. There are ethnic, class, regional, neighborhood and community, intergenerational, political, and intracultural and other differences that must be considered in a course on African American relationships (Hill et al. 2005).

Of particular significance are class differences. Although information on the effects of sociohistorical factors and current racial oppression may be beneficial for African Americans of all socioeconomic statuses, it is important to note that how they are affected by these factors depends on where they are in the socioeconomic strata. For example, those in the lower socioeconomic strata may have more problems with employment, be more involved with the criminal justice system and child support and social welfare agencies, and experience more environmental stressors. A course would therefore need to be adapted to the socioeconomic status of participants and include partnerships with agencies that can address their specific needs, for example, reentry organizations that assist African American males with rejoining their families after incarceration.

Another significant factor is the role of popular culture in shaping African American values, for example consumerism and the hypermasculinity prevalent in some genres of hip-hop creative productions. Popular audio and video can be used to engage participants in critical analysis of the messages that are conveyed and how they contribute to or detract from healthy relationships.

In summary, a relation and marriage course should begin with African American sociohistorical experiences and cultural information from both the African and African American heritages. It should seek to engage participants in critical analysis and dialogue around ideas and values shaping their approach to relationships and marriage and incorporate skill-building exercises that provide the chance to explore similarities and differences around all the areas discussed throughout this paper. In addition, it should encourage respect and appreciation for differences.

For faith-based and community programs, a course that is spiritually based and employs facilitators who look like the participants, share similar experiences, and use creative oratorical skills along with audio and video tools can enhance learning for African Americans. Finally, although the AARMs program includes the African American Relationships, Marriages and Families and may be sufficient for faith-based and community organizations, Knox and Schacht's *Choices in Relationships*, for general information on marriage and family, Somé's *Spirit of Intimacy*, for the African-centered approach, and African American Male-Female Relationships: A Reader, (Dixon 2013) for more critical analysis of relationships might be used for college-level African American relationships courses. Additional resources that can be used to enhance the course or program are listed below.

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Resources

Below are resources that can be used to enhance the relationships and marriage course or program. Some of these are found in the AARMS facilitator's guide with instructions on how to use them.

Books and Articles

- Amen, R. U. N. *An Afrocentric guide to a spiritual union*. Bronx, NY: Khamit.
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Films

- *The Great & Mighty Walk with John Henrick Clarke*: An African and African American historical overview starting with ancient Egypt.
- *Antionne Fisher*: Black male search for father figure.
- *Baby Boy*: The baby-boy syndrome, communication among African American men, and three generations of dysfunction among African American men.
- *Brown Sugar*: Healthy relationships.
- *The Best Man*: Healthy relationships and males praying together to resolve conflict; prince charming idea.
- *The Brothers*: Black male relationships, male–female relationships, and sex values.
- *Boys to Men*: Father image, definition of manhood.
- *Daddy's Little Girl*: Male shortage, class differences.
- *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*: Domestic violence.
- *Disappearing Acts*: Black male joblessness.
- *Ethnic Notions*: History of stereotypes.
- *Jason's Lyrics*: prince charming idea.
- *John Q*: Positive image of fatherhood
- *Madea's Family Reunion*: Domestic violence, healthy definition of love, family.
- *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*: Shortage of males, age differences.
- *Soul Food*: Black male joblessness.
- *Something New*: Shortage of males, interracial relationships.
- *The Souls of Black Girls*: African American women on beauty including hair and color.
- *Two Can Play that Game*: Dating misperceptions.

Online Resources

- African American healthy marriage initiative: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage>

- African American relationships blog: www.relationshipstalk.com/
- African American weddings: <http://www.vibrade.com/> <http://www.ebonybridalplanner.com/community/>
- Association of Black psychologists: <http://www.abpsi.org/>
- Black and married with kids: <http://blackandmarriedwithkids.com/>
- Sex therapy: <http://drsadiesheafe.com/aboutme.html>
- The better sex video series for Black couples: <http://www.ebonyintimacy.com/>