

JUMPING THE BROOM:  
FROM SLAVERY TO  
TODAY

by

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ABSTRACT

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Jumping the Broom: From Slavery to Today  
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This study will describe the impact of slavery on the modern African American couple. The review of literature will describe some common practices used in slavery to support the slave trade. The result of these practices on the African couple in slavery will be examined. Information on modern couples of African descent will be gathered from recent statistics. Recent statistics reflecting modern trends in African American relationships

will be compared to the trends that evolved in African American relationships during slavery. Following the literature review, Professionals of African American descent will participate in an interview to attain their opinions on the effects of slavery on African American couples. The information from the interview will be contrasted with the review of literature. The final conclusion will connect the interview and review of literature to theories found in Family Therapy. The purpose of this study is to gain information about the effects of slavery on the modern African couple. Then use this information to enhance professional ability to successfully treat couples of African American descent.

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This researcher cannot forget the many sacrifices made by my right hand  
When you are right handed you have the tendency to overuse your right hand because to use your left makes you vulnerable. Thanks, Vikki.

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DIFFERENTIATE!

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## Chapter I

### Introduction

This investigation discusses the effect of slavery on early African American couples and how, as a result, contemporary African American couples are in the process of redefining their relationship with each other. Information for this investigation is gathered from the professional literature as well as from in-person interviews conducted with professionals who work with African American couples. Chapter one presents the purpose and objectives of the investigation, its limitations, the interview questions used with the professional, and the definition of terms. Chapter two presents the findings from the literature. Chapter three presents the interview results.

### Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study is to describe how conditions during slavery continue to affect African American couples today.

#### The objectives of this study are to:

1. Identify how conditions during slavery affected on relationships between African American couples.

2. Identify current conditions that affect African American couples.
3. Explain how conditions during slavery affect African American couples today.
4. Discuss implications of this study for therapists working with African American couples.
5. Interview and discuss the effects of slavery on modern couples with African American professionals who work with African American couples.

#### Assumptions and Limitations

1. The interviewees have varied degrees of knowledge in this area.
2. This is a qualitative study that cannot establish cause and effect.
3. Since some conditions in slavery depended on the behavior of the Slave Masters, it is possible that slaves could have received a range of different experiences.
4. Mental Health Diagnosis was not practiced during the era of slavery in America, consequently mental illness must be inferred from behaviors reported in history



### Definition of Terms

1. Slavery = the exploitation of Africans for labor that was used for economic and personal gain
2. African American = Americans who are descendants of slaves who were brought to the United States from Africa
3. Slave-shame = the shame that effects children of recovering slaves and reflects a feeling of inferiority, worthiness, and incompetence.
4. Multigenerational transmission process = Murray Bowen's concept for the projection of varying degrees of immaturity to different children in the same family; the child who is most involved in the family emotional process emerges with the lowest level of differentiation (i.e.: sense of an independent self).
5. Externalization = Michael White's technique of getting families to fight to control their problem, as if problems were external to persons.
6. Rites of Passage = The traditional process of training boys and girls to take on roles of men and women in the community. The completion of this process marks the transition to adulthood.

7. Procreation = production of offspring
8. Dark-skinned = a complexion found on people of African descent that is represented by dark brown to black hue
9. Light-skinned = a complexion found on people of African descent that is represented by light brown to white hue
10. Alien-Self Disorder = Disorder found in African Americans that is characterized by identifying with values and beliefs outside of one's own culture
11. Anti-Self Disorder = Disorder found in African Americans that is characterized by internal hatred directed at ones own culture, family, and person
12. "flesh connection" = Maulana Karenga's term for the African American who seeks out sexual relationships to satisfy their need for love
13. "cash connection" = Maulana Karenga' term for the African American who seeks out financial security to satisfy their need for love
14. Black = African Americans

15. Unique outcomes = successes that had been obscured or unnoticed by clients who focus solely on unsolved problems
16. Eurocentric = Values that support European perceptions of reality such as independence, competition, and mastery over nature
17. Afrocentric = Africentric; Values that support African perceptions of reality such as interdependence with the community, communal sharing, harmony with nature

## Chapter II

In Africa, before the institution of slavery, the ancestors of today's African Americans had their own unique understanding of how men and women should interact in a relationship. Marriage was a valued institution. Although the details of traditional relationships among Africans varied between tribes, some common beliefs were that a man and a woman must complete a ritual and ceremony before the community respects their union. Africans also believed that "Marriage is an involvement of both the bride's and the groom's extended family" (Turtoe-Sanders, 1998).

African societies viewed marriage not only as the joining of one man with one woman, but as a means of linking two extended families to expand their influence on economic, religious and political units (Hopson, 1994). The community acknowledged this union to be legal and believed that marriage was the only legitimate intimate relationship. The practice of polygamy was popular in Africa before slavery. This was a practice that was accepted by men and women. "Some wives even proposition women for their husband. This does not in anyway mean that they do not love their husbands

–far from it” (Turtoe-Sanders, 1998 p. 21). It is also noted that African couples would seldom see each other without being married or engaged. African couples rarely got divorced. The extended family and community played a pivotal part in resolving conflicts and helping the couple to stay together.

In 1502, Portugal brought the first shipload of African slaves to the Western Hemisphere (Estell, 1994). African slaves did not begin to be imported to the colonies until 1629. Although...“Congress bars the importation of any new slaves into the territory of the United States (effective January 1, 1808). The law was ignored” (Estell, 1994, p. 13). Slavery did not officially end until 1865 when the thirteenth amendment was added to the constitution. By this time there had been over two hundred years of slavery, which affected many generations of people. This experience damaged the African American’s family culture and customs.

Slave masters actively attempted to destroy the kinship bonds and the cultural system of Africans in slavery (Boyd-Franklin, 1989). This was achieved by separating slaves from their homeland, families, mating rituals,

religion, and language. Slaves were not allowed to have traditional marriages or marry according to American standards. Therefore, slaves had no rights as a family member. Slave families were not acknowledged as legitimate families. Both Black women and Black men were abused sexually—men as breeders to increase the labor supply and women as sexual objects for White slave masters (Giddings, 1983; Pinkney, 1975; Rose, 1982). For example, in Africa, before the institution of slavery, the ancestors of today's African Americans had their own unique understanding of how men and women should interact in a relationship. The details of traditional relationships among Africans varied between tribes in Africa. Some common beliefs among Africans were that a man and a woman must complete a ritual and ceremony before the community respects their union. Africans also believed that "Marriage is an involvement of both the bride's and the groom's extended family" (Turtoe-Sanders, 1998).

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This pattern was started in slavery when female/male slaves were required to mate with various partners at the demand of the slave owner (Sutton, 1993). This experience minimized the value of relationships and maximized the value of brief sexual encounters. Slave masters rewarded the virility of slaves. Therefore, creating a sense of self-worth tied to the ability to father many children. Many slave masters denied the opportunity for slaves to play nurturing and protective roles throughout a child's lifespan.

Descendants of African slaves continue to struggle with maintaining healthy relationships. Today's African American couple is working through issues that threaten the couple's stability. Issues that impact African American couples are: not engaging in marriage; shortage of men; promiscuity and poverty. Understanding the influence that slavery has on current problems in African American couples may help them overcome these conditions (Akbar, 1984). The result of White masters controlling the existence of the couple facilitated an experience that is defined as "slave shame" by Anthony Sutton in his book Breaking Chains: Hope for Adult Children of Recovering Slaves (1993). It is suggested by Anthony Sutton that

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## African Roots

The African couples had their own system of marriage. Their current relationship can only be understood through understanding their cultural roots. African people had an allegiance for their tribe. The decisions were made based on the concerns of the community as opposed to the individual (Hopson, 1994). The African culture expressed itself through dance, music, storytelling, and ritual celebrations. These creative forms of expression were used to teach values and socially accepted behavior to the community. Rites of passage gave boys and girls a clear understanding of their roles in a relationship (Asante, 1981). A primary role of a male and female was to be united in marriage. Marriage was the only acceptable way that a man and a woman could co-exist in traditional African culture. “For (traditional) African people, marriage is the focus of existence. It is the point where all the members of a given community meet the departed, the living and those yet-to-be-born. “All the dimensions of time meets here, and the whole drama of history repeated, renewed and revitalized...Therefore marriage is a duty, a requirement from the corporate society, and a rhythm of life in which

everyone must participate...Failure to get married under normal circumstances means that the person has rejected society and society rejects him in return” (Harper-Bolton, 1981, p.33). Therefore, to discuss couples through an African perspective means studying married couples because unmarried couples rarely existed.

### Traditional African Marriage

The marriage ritual for Africans actually began during puberty rites of passage. Boys and Girls were separated from each other during this time (Ra Un Nefer Amen, 1992). Boys were separated from the community and guided by the men of the community. The community instructed children on the difference between childish and adult behavior. They were instructed through ordeals or trials designed to assist them in learning adult values (Amen, 1992). The primary theme of adulthood that was taught to these young boys and girls was the importance of mastering ones animal instincts and emotions. This was regarded as crucial when dealing with relationships with the opposite sex (Amen, 1992).

African marriages were designed to assure the survival of the community. Africans felt so strongly about marriage that the adults of the community were responsible for deciding on the appropriate mate (Amen, 1992). In order to insure this survival there were steps indoctrinated in the marriage ritual. Since the support of the household will be provided by the man, it is the man's job to send his friend with a token of his earning potential to ask the daughter's hand in marriage (Amen, 1992). If the daughter accepts the proposal, then the engagement ritual would proceed to the second step. The father would meet with members of his family and community to investigate the boy and his family's background. The father seeks to find answers to questions like "Did the boy pass the rites of passage? Are the boy and his family physically and mentally healthy? Is he open to counsel and discussion? Does the boy and his family exemplify good character?" (Amen, 1992). If the daughter's father is satisfied with the answers to these questions, he then contacts the boy's father. The boy's father will complete a similar investigation on the daughter's family (Amen, 1992). After both sides have given consent, the consummation of the wedding will take place. During this

time, the families are becoming familiar with each other and the couple is becoming more educated about marriage.

The third step is the raising of the money for the dowry. This is an important piece of the marriage ritual. This step is designed to test the boy's social standing with the family and community (Amen, 1992). The dowry price is so high that the boy must have an endorsement from family and friends. Africans believe that this ensures the support of the boy's family. If the couple were to break up, then fault would be established. Whoever was at fault would forfeit the dowry. This is an incentive built into the ritual to ensure a long prosperous marriage (Amen, 1992). Unity in traditional African philosophy is marriage and procreation. Africans saw procreation as a reproduction of the mother and father (Harper-Bolton, 1981). Reproduction of mother and father allowed a connection to the family when one dies (Harper-Bolton, 1981). Procreation is considered a contribution to the continuation and preservation of the family and of African philosophy (Harper-Bolton, 1981).

Africans believed in being in harmony with nature (Dixon, 1976). For that reason, they interpreted the roles for men and women by distinguishing the natural contribution men and women make to the community. Women were given primary responsibility for domestic nurturance. The African male primary responsibility was environmental nurturance. This included hunting and gathering food. It is important to acknowledge that in the traditional African family (couple), primary responsibility was not a question of “woman’s work” and “man’s work” because both were needed for the survival of the family (Harper –Bolton, 1981). The African couple was flexible in the work they did. If it became needed for men to take on women’s primary responsibility, then men would teach and nurture the young. If it became needed for women to help men hunt, trap, build, run the marketplace, give advice, or don armor for battle, then women would take on that responsibility (Harper-Bolton, 1981).

### Polygamy

Polygamy was a marriage system that Africans widely practiced. The African culture used this system because it allowed all persons in the

community to experience being a part of a family system. Polygamy is a socially constructed solution to address the issue of male shortage (Kunjufu, 1996). According to Chukwuma Egibujor, a Nigerian born social worker, polygamy served the purpose of addressing economic conditions and preventing illegitimate births. Egibujor stated that wealth and power were associated with polygamy. Polygamy protected the community from social ills such as single parent households, adultery, and poverty.

### Marital Disruption

Slavery disrupted the traditional marriage ritual for Africans. Marriage between black slaves was not legally recognized. Therefore, the slave master had the right to separate families at will through sales and trades with other slave owners. The owners were considered head of the household and they had the final say as to who would be married (Hopson, 1995). “From the initiation of a romance, black men and women had to confront and compromise with their masters about control of their intimate lives” (Stevenson, 1996, p. 26). “Even after a slave’s marriage, his or her master still commonly decided when slave husbands and wives could see each other,



if and when they can live or work together, the fate of their children, and sometimes even the number of children they had” (Stevenson, 1996).

Although, marriages were not legal, the community and family would reinforce a union between a man and a woman who wanted to be married. The community developed their own ceremony for marriage (Stevenson, 1996). The most widely used ceremony was called “jumping the broom.” This act gave some power back to the slave community in that the community and extended family could always reject an offer from a suitor (Stevenson, 1996). Many slaves chose to jump the broom with spouses from another plantation. Under these conditions, slave men would not be a part of their family’s daily life because they would only be able to visit their spouse on specific days (Stevenson, 1996).

This was a widely accepted living arrangement for slaves. In this arrangement, men had little influence in the daily responsibilities of managing a relationship and family on a daily basis. This arrangement proved beneficial for the slave master because he always had the power to force procreation with his own slaves. He could demand that men breed, even

those who were married to women outside of the plantation. This arrangement often put slaves in a predicament where they would have relationships with more than just their chosen spouse. Planters in the south dissolved 32.4% of the slave unions (Blassingame, 1979). Although these forced unions and separations assisted in making the slave institution unstable, it must be noted that there were many unions that lasted for decades.

### Mental Illness

There were a variety of reactions to the separation of spouses and families. Slaves often did not recover from the shock of separation (Amini, 1972). Some became indifferent to their work. Others began to hallucinate, and talk to themselves, which were symptoms of insanity (Amini, 1972). A few slaves developed suicidal tendencies (Amini, 1972). The number of slaves with suicidal tendencies may be under represented due to the fact that some slaves would commit suicide by leading slave revolts. Therefore, the hopelessness of slavery occasionally caused mental illness in the slave quarters (Amini, 1972). Reports of actual cases have survived to suggest some causal linkages between the treatment of slaves and mental illness.

“Susan Boggs, a former Virginia slave, recalled in 1863 a slave Women who went crazy because her two sons were sold and sent to the traders jail. She went up and down the streets, crying like an animal.” (Amini, 1972, p. 300)

Slaves often went through a “break-in-period” which was carried out in the Caribbean Islands (Williams, 1991). During this time slaves were trained in what would be expected of them by slave masters. Slaves were subjected to some harsh and traumatic experiences (Williams, 1991). Many slaves had to cope with the realities of rape, beatings, and killings. Slaves had to live with these terrible acts of cruelty either through direct or indirect experience. “Therefore, all slaves were mentally, socially and psychologically affected by these acts” (Williams, 1991, p. 29).

Richard Williams (Williams, 1991) states in his book They Stole It, But You Must Return It that generally humans respond to extreme stressful situations through coping by fighting, running, or compromise. These are called first level coping strategies. Dr. Williams argues that although many Blacks resisted slavery through revolts, overall, these attempts to cope by fighting were unsuccessful for the majority of slaves (Williams, 1991). Since

many revolts ended with the deaths of participating slaves, it provided little promise of survival for the African slave. Dr. Williams concludes that using running away to cope with the stress of slavery was equally unsuccessful since many slaves did not succeed (Williams, 1991). Coping through compromise was not successful because the slave did not have any opportunities for bargaining. As a result of the failure of the first level coping strategies, slaves were forced to use ego-defense mechanisms to protect self from insults and psychological hurt (Williams, 1991). These defense mechanisms were successful in helping the slave to survive during these inhumane conditions. The side effect of prolonged use of defense mechanisms for the slave was that the mechanism became habitual and led to a degree of self-deception and distortion of reality (Williams, 1991).

African slave women developed a defense called “compensation.” This is defined as a way of making up for something that is missing (Williams, 1991). In this case, the black male became the missing object due to constant trading and selling. Although some fathers were able to live near their spouse and children, they did not have regular access to their families due to long

hours of service to the master. On many plantations, the most powerful slave on the plantation was an older woman (Williams, 1991). Sometimes this woman would care for the slave master's children and could say things to the slave master that other slaves could not (Williams, 1991). Since slavery contributed to eliminating the father's role in the family, black women had to assume roles as both mother and father.

Slave mothers understood that if her male child was to survive the slavery experience, his chances were best if he behaved in the way the slave master wanted him to behave (Williams, 1991). This meant becoming physically strong, a good breeder and docile to the institution of slavery. Therefore, many mothers set their sons up for disappointment in relationships by reinforcing the roles that the slave master enforced (Williams, 1991). During slavery, the female slave recognized that her only chance of having any stable relationship with a black man was if the black man offered no threat to the evils of slavery. If a black man threatened the status quo, then he risked being beaten severely, sold to another plantation, or killed. As a result,

many Black women often were conditioned to discourage certain aggressive behaviors in black men.

The African male slave utilized a defense mechanism called “rationalization”. Dr. William defines rationalization as “a situation where one must perform a particular act or behavior that is not really acceptable to his self-respect or conscience. One must cope with this situation by rationalization. To do this, one must form in their mind an acceptable reason for performing this act. One then uses his/her own socially acceptable reason because the real reason damages his self-respect and self-concept” (Williams, 1991, p. 36).

The black male was not allowed the responsibility to be a husband or father. He was just a breeder. Therefore, he chose to rationalize his situation (Williams, 1991). The black man began to evaluate his situation as desirable. The black male viewed himself as an unconfined stud. Typically, Black men who were slaves would not become attached to their families because it was too painful when these family members were removed from the home. Black men accepted this unattachment as a way of life (Williams, 1991). Young

Black boys witnessed adult males unattached. This pattern of interacting was passed down from one generation to another. Today, many black males are fathers of several families but take little or no responsibility for their children, although some fathers may give money to the mother and children if it is possible. However, they usually will not give much nurturance to their children (Williams, 1991). They often brag about these conquests to their peers. Peers pressure young black males to establish themselves as potential breeders because it gives black men respect and acceptance with his friends and age group (Williams, 1991).

### Unmarried Couples

In the book, Friends, Lovers and Soul Mates: A Guide To Better Relationships Between Black Men And Women, Derek and Darlene Hopson attribute the lack of marital commitment between African American couples to a collective myth that evolved out of slavery (Hopsons, 1994). The Hopsons state “Our marriages were outlawed and our ancestors were denied the right to marry. Because long-term commitments were hard to keep, many of the relationships we formed were temporary” (Hopsons, 1994, p. 56).

According to the Hopsons, African American couples learned that it is alright to participate in several relationships at the same time. Therefore, one does not have to make a commitment in order to have a partner (Hopsons, 1994). According to the U.S. Census in 1970, 68 percent of all Black families consisted of two married parents. By Williams, 1991, this had dropped to 48 percent of Black families with two married parents in the household.



## Chapter III

### Interview

Subjects used in the interview were chosen using three qualifiers. (1) They must be professionals in the helping field and provide direct care to African American couples. (2) They must be of African descent. (3) They must have some knowledge of the institution of slavery that may come from research studies, historical information, or experiential oral history that may have been passed down from generations. This writer chose the interviewees based on the qualifiers described previously. This writer informed the interviewees (using the consent form in the Appendix) that the interview was voluntary and false names will be given to the interviewee in order to protect his or her identity. Xavier, York, and Zion are false names used to protect the identity of the participants of the study.

All participants were referred to this writer by mutual clinical associates:

Xavier is a 58-year-old practicing Psychologist and Couples therapist in the Twin City area. He has been practicing therapy for thirty years. Xavier is currently divorce and has begun dating. He has done some research on the slavery experience. We met for a one-time interview, which were conducted for two hours at his office.

York is a 27-year-old, Clinical Psychology Doctoral candidate at the University of Maryland. She currently resides in the Louisiana area. York reports that she has gotten most of her information about slavery in history books. York has never been married, but has sustained a relationship for five years.

Zion is in his late fifties and has a background in Family Therapy and has done some research on slavery. He is currently married and work as a program director in the Twin City metro area. We conducted a two hour interview in his home.

### Interview Questions

Each person interviewed was given the following questions:

- 1.) A. Describe the institution of slavery?
- 2.) How did African couples relate to each other under such oppressive conditions?
- 3.) Are you aware of any courting or dating rituals that were used during slavery?
- 4.) Are you aware of any rituals during slavery that recognized a union between slaves that were involved in a conjugal relationship?
- 5.) In your profession, can you identify experiences of slavery that still affect couples of African American decent?
- 6.) In your personal experience, can you identify experiences of slavery that still affect couples of African descent?
- 7.) Do you think other experiences of slavery still affect African American families today?
- 8.) Is it possible for the slavery experience of the past to affect the present?

- 9.) What are the experiences of slavery that most professionals are not aware of which can affect African American couples today?
- 10.) What are the experiences of slavery that most African Americans are not aware of, which can affect African American couples today?
- 11.) What can professionals do to help African American couples evolve from behaviors that developed during slavery?
- 12.) Should Professionals in the field of Couples Counseling accept the patterns that were created during slavery? If not, how should professionals confront these patterns?

In response to these questions, Xavier, York and Zion offered a variety of answers. The first question dealt with the institution of slavery. Zion reported that slavery was dehumanizing and destructive for African Americans. York reported that she believes that a system (slavery) was put in place for the purpose of making black people feel inferior about themselves and to develop a dependency on the system so that the slaves could remain slaves. Xavier stated that the institution of slavery was indoctrinated to

capitalize on the labor that slaves could provide. The bottom line was to make profit at the expense of the slave. Xavier went on to report that the slavery experience might have strengthened the connection between couples in slavery. Xavier supported the resilience of the Black couple, which he believes developed out of the need to work together in order to survive the institution of slavery. “The fear of perishing caused more co-mingling between couples”; the divided tribes of Africa were seen as one entity in America. Therefore, [the fear of perishing] encouraged slaves to get over their tribal differences and to stand together against slavery.

The second question pertains to dating rituals. Zion reported that African males had to impress their potential mates with witty indirect expressions of interest. They also had to demonstrate their work ethic to potential mates. York added that the male had to initiate a courtship by asking permission from the mother or guardian. Xavier mentioned prowess with words; an articulation was expected of men who desired a courtship. Xavier points out that sexuality and courting was seen as a marker for maturity or a rite of passage.

The third question addresses rituals that recognized unions between slaves. All participants identified “jumping the broom” as a recognized union between slaves. Xavier also identified co-habiting as a ritual that recognizes the union between slaves.

The fourth question address residuals of slavery that still affect couples today. All participants mentioned the displacement of the African male. The participants believe that the burden of supporting a family fell on the mothers who would work outside of the house and still was responsible for maintaining peace within the home. Many times this task was done without the man due to the disruptive separations carried out during slavery. All participants agree that slavery developed a disposition for African American women to take care of all responsibilities and not allow their mate to contribute. As a result, the male is displaced and invisible when they attempt to contribute to the relationship.

The fifth question deals with personal experiences with residuals of slavery. Zion told a story of loyalty and love that transcended distance. Zion recounted stories of men and women who maintained relationships with each

other even after death. Zion reported that at that time couples committed to each other even beyond death. Also in response to this question, Xavier and York both identified experiences of the skin color complex. Xavier retold the story of the house slave and the field slave. The house slave was considered better than the field slave and was often given authority over the field slave. The house slave reaped the benefit of having a close to comfortable lifestyle, while the field slave was expected to work and live under harder conditions. The field slave was typically dark-skinned and the house slave was typically light-skinned. Xavier and York both believe that couples continue to use the color complex to interpret superiority and loyalty and this still divides and diminishes the race.

In response to the seventh question, all participants simply agreed that it is possible for slavery to affect the present as reflected in the answers to the other questions.

The eighth question regards the experiences of slavery that most professionals do not know. Zion reported that most professionals do not understand or recognize the resilience of the African American couple.

Xavier reported that the struggle for definition of role affects African American social status and conditions. York states that she believes that professionals should understand that the slavery experience caused trauma to the African male's identity of manhood, which has been replaced by a new definition of manhood that includes being a "stud," procreating illegitimate children, and not making the commitment to marriage.

The ninth question asks about the experiences of slavery that most African Americans do not know. All participants stated "history". York reported the bible and how it was used in the south to invoke social control over slavery. York reported that slaves were urged to accept the pain and suffering of this world so that they can enjoy the love and acceptance in heaven. Xavier reported that many African American couples are not aware of the source of their discord. Xavier goes on to say that professionals can educate, help couples communicate and aid in the development of community. York supports professionals providing accurate information about history and its possible effects on African American couples today. The purpose of educating and providing culturally specific information on



history is to build the self-esteem of couples. She also states that professionals should not accept/excuse unwanted behaviors that were born out of slavery.

In summary, all the participants agree that the slavery experience for early African Americans continues to influence behavior patterns between today's African American couple. They all agree that the institution of slavery has displaced the African American male in the family system. Consequently, the female has had to replace the male's absence with her own presence. African American women take on a level of functioning that undermines their attempts to maintain a relationship. Therefore, the male receives conflicting messages about their role in the family. Another experience from slavery that affects today's African American couple is the perception that procreation, and sexual conquests define manhood.

## Chapter IV

### The Present Day Couple

Relationships between African American men and women have become complex and tenuous (Bethea, 1995). People have accepted stereotypes that the African American male is lazy and unreliable and the African American female is too domineering for the good of her man, often resulting in the emasculation of the African American male (Bethea, 1995).

These stereotypes have their root in slavery. Drawing from the literature and interviews it is clear that limiting the role of father and husband changed the roles of men and the power given to women over their families (Bethea, 1995). The result of this upheaval has been the source of much African American conflict since slavery. African American couples are in a continual posture of opposition and blaming (Bethea, 1995). Anthony Sutton reports in his book, Breaking Chains: Hope for Adult Children of Recovering Slaves (Sutton, 1993), that slave-shamers are overly critical of the person that they are shaming. They are quick to point out mistakes in order to prove their “superiority”. African American’s who are deep rooted in shame sometimes

direct it at other African Americans (Sutton, 1993). This way of coping (also known as projecting) fails to focus on the American system that historically offered unequal access to education and employment as vehicles for success (Bethea, 1995). African Americans find that the tension of living in American society filter into their relationship (Bethea, 1995).

### The Choice To Marry

As mentioned previously, during slavery African American couples were not recognized or protected by law (Williams, 1991). Some slaves chose to define their own marriage through private rituals. They could not sustain these marriages because of their illegal status (Williams, 1991). The experience of slavery left the African American couple feeling powerless and afraid of commitment. The reduction of commitment is noted in the African American Almanac (Estell, 1994). In 1991, 38.4% of African American women over the age of fifteen were married compared to 60% in 1960 (Estell, 1994). In 1991, 48% of African American males were married and 63.3% in 1960 (Estell, 1994). Although these statistics describe current figures on marriage, the fall in marriage rates correspond with the period of integration.

One could imply that the way integration was executed, aided in African American reliving the slave experience. Especially since many African American teachers and professionals lost employment, during this period. Further investigation must be done to address the relationship between integration and slavery. Research has shown that the “shortage of black” men is one reason for the decline in African American marriages. The shortage of black men is attributed to the high mortality rate, incarceration rate, and increasing involvement in homosexual and interracial relationships.

### Mental Disorders

According to Na'im Akbar, a Florida State University professor, the mortality rate, incarceration rate, involvement in passive African Americans and interracial relationships is all a part of mental disorders among African Americans (1979). Akbar contends that inhumane conditions bring about insanity and slavery and oppression constitutes one of the most inhumane conditions (Akbar, 1979). The unnatural pressures imposed on human life by human abuse drives people away from reality. In order to operate in the

world of reality, human beings must think of themselves as worthy and effective (Akbar, 1979).

Such blockages to human development also block developing as a responsible man, woman, or self-determined and socially productive human (Akbar, 1979). Systematic injustice destroys trust and predictability of the environment encourages retreat from the world of reality (Akbar, 1979).

These are individuals who have found the doors of legitimate survival locked and who have chosen personally and socially destructive means to alleviate wants and needs (Akbar, 1979). Pimping, prostitution, illegal drug dealing, running numbers, stealing, and other criminal and illegal activities are some of the behaviors expressed by destructive means. These individuals feed the prisons and morgues across America resulting in a shortage of men eligible to marry.

Passive Behavior is associated with the Alien-Self Disorder (Akbar, 1979). This describes the group of African American individuals who have been socialized to model after other groups of people (Akbar, 1979). They have been socialized to take on values outside of their own traditional African

culture. They are encouraged to adopt the perspective of the dominant, even if it means condemning one's self (Akbar, 1979). In the case of passive African American men, Akbar argued that these men were usually raised to deny their own masculine disposition because their displays of assertiveness were not reinforced by the family circle. In the case of female homosexuality, women retreated from the dominant culture definition of femininity because it was not attainable for women of African descent (Akbar, 1979).

Interracial marriages are the result of the Anti-Self Disorder (Akbar, 1979). The African American that becomes involved in this type of relationship as a result of their internal hatred toward themselves may be classified in this manner. It should be noted that the African American that becomes involved in an interracial relationship, but maintain a connection and commitment to other African Americans might not be included in these criteria for a disorder. The Anti-Self Disorder is defined as the overt hostility towards one's own culture (Akbar, 1979). The Anti-Self Disorder goes beyond identifying with the dominant group, but also identifies with the projected hostility and negativism towards his/her own group (Akbar, 1979).

The types of people who may suffer from this disorder are the policemen who attack other black people with violence unnecessarily (Akbar, 1979), or African American scholars who are more concerned about their own scientific credibility than about racial empowerment (Akbar, 1979). These are the businessmen who are concerned about their own economic prosperity rather than the communities in which they live (Akbar, 1979). These are the educators and administrators who first want the approval of the dominant group (Akbar, 1979).

This disorder may also affect African Americans who have been diagnosed with mental disorders that are physical but may be aggravated by social and environmental contributions (Akbar, 1979). These organic brain disorders include schizophrenia, fetal alcohol syndrome, and children who are born with malnutrition that effects the functioning of the brain (Akbar, 1979). Difficulty coping with such illnesses is compounded by the legacies of slavery described in this paper.

Promiscuity

“By sexualizing a relationship with a male/female slave-child or not allowing him/her the right to his/her own body and sexuality, slavery destined adult children of recovering slaves to struggle with issues of sexual addiction generation after generation” (Sutton, 1993). When adult children of recovering slaves deny their sexuality they suffer the consequences, sometimes ending in self-abuse and self-hatred (Sutton, 1993). Addictive behaviors consume their lives, their sense of isolation, frustration, desperation and emptiness become overwhelming (Sutton, 1993). The sexual addict will then rationalize his/her values in an attempt to protect the addictive behaviors (Sutton, 1993).

Maulana Karenga explains these behaviors as the “flesh connection” which is one of the modes of connection that modern African Americans experience in their relationships (Karenga, 1978). The flesh connection is based on the pursuit of sex (Karenga, 1978). This connection focuses on the body (flesh) and all the perverse things one can do with all selected parts of it (Karenga, 1978). This is the sex machine phenomenon of society (Karenga, 1978). The “flesh connection” provides the basis of most games played in African



American relationships (Burgest, 1990). Both men and women play these games. Women use games to control, manipulate and dominate the African American male. They reserve participating in sexual relations unless their mate honors their demands. They may withhold sex out of anger. This is considered a punishment for men who have upset their wives or significant others (Burgest, 1990). African American women may delude their mate into believing that they are beyond reproach in certain areas of their sexual being (Burgest, 1990). A popular game that African American women play is to offer sex in the name of love.

African American men play sexual games similar to that of African American women. Some games that describe the male experience include the game of indebtedness (Burgest, 1990). This game reminds the woman if she accepts his support then she must provide sexual favors. Many men play the game that women must be subservient to the man because he earns the money. Men also challenge women to prove their love by providing sexual behaviors (Burgest, 1990). The sexual games that African American males

and females play with each other are destructive to the development of a genuine and lasting relationship (Burgest, 1990).

### Black Economy

Slaves were made to work under the threat of violence and death (Akbar, 1984). The work was for the benefit of the slave master (Akbar, 1984). The slave would neither profit nor benefit from labor (Akbar, 1984). A good crop did not improve his life, his family or his community (Akbar, 1984). Work in a natural society is gazed upon with pride because it permits people to express themselves (Akbar, 1984). Yet, during slavery it was used as punishment. Work became a hated activity which produces no reward for the doer (Akbar, 1984). Work is strongly identified with slavery (Akbar, 1984). The African American slang for work is “slave” which communicates the painful connection of work and enslavement (Akbar, 1984).

After the institution of slavery, African Americans continued to attain little pay for their work. This paralyzed the black male from providing

financial security for their spouses. This phenomenon continues today and is seen in the higher unemployment rate for African American men. In 1991, the unemployment rate doubled the unemployment rate for white Americans (Estell, 1994). In The African American Almanac, Estell (1994) attributes the variance in unemployment rates between blacks and whites to discrimination in the past and present, in the job market along with other spheres of economic opportunity.

The continued restriction of resources, along with the expectations women have for their mates, produces a volatile source of conflict in African American relationships. In the article “Employment Factors In Relationships” Dixon (1998) reports some African American women had strong objections to men who are unwilling to assume employment that they think is beneath them; men who find excuses or blame white men and America for their problems; and men who have low motivation and a resistance to working hard (Dixon, 1998). Women are choosing to restrain from relationships due to the economic, marginalization of the African male.

Those males who do attain a degree of economic success may be a victim of the “cash connection” (Karenga, 1978). The cash connection is the presence of financial resources by either gender in the relationship (Karenga, 1978). One of the mates searches out another mate who can provide financial stability. This exchange of sex to economic security under the guise of marriage also jeopardizes the opportunity for a healthy relationship (Karenga, 1978).

## Chapter V

### Conclusion

It seems the experience of slavery is still haunting African American couples today. Although many of the relationship difficulties described above are also experienced in marriages of other ethnic racial groups-such Latino, Asian, Native American, and Whites. It may be argued that the slavery experience has made these issues especially difficult for African Americans. The fact that the last incident of legal slavery was in the year of 1865 does not negate the degree of influence it has on the descendents of slavery. Many family therapists have studied the family structure across generations. Murray Bowen stated that the problem in children who misbehave could be contributed to a multigenerational sequence in which all family members play a part (Nichols & Schwartz, 1995). This means that the cause of some maladaptive behavior is the product of the relationship of the identified patient parents, grandparents, and great-grand parents (Nichols & Schwartz, 1995). This is called the Multigenerational Transmission Process (Nichols & Schwartz, 1995).

If Murray Bowen's theory is true, then today's humans are currently behaving as a result of family emotional processes occurring over multiple generations (Nichols & Schwartz, 1995). It is possible for many Africans to be only three to four generations removed from slavery, leaving some with residues of emotional forces that continue to operate in recurrent patterns. Couples that were torn apart from their loved ones during slavery, men who were not allowed to protect and provide for their mates, women who assumed responsibility for both the male and female role, and couples who were demanded to perform acts of infidelity to procreate children for the purpose of free labor all contribute to the emotional process of couples today.

York reported in her interview that the slavery experience disrupted the African's idea of manhood. York believes that it has been replaced by a definition of manhood that supports the stereotype of the promiscuous stud. The promiscuous stud, along with women who avoid marriage, men who attach self-worth to the number of women they impregnate, women who refuse to relieve their responsibility to men, and women who view their bodies as possessions to be owned or taken is the result of a recurrent pattern

established in slavery. Since pre-slave African people had a system of courtship and marriage that prevented issues of illegitimacy, marital separation, community poverty and fidelity one can conclude that at least some of the strife that African American couples now experience comes from the residuals of slavery.

### Recommendations For Professionals

To the extent that the effects of slavery continue to influence African American intimate relationships (Staples, 1988), it is important for professionals to know the history of slavery and its impact on family life. The knowledge of African history before slavery offers some insights into the solutions of marital conflict today. American society overtly and covertly defines black men and women as being inferior to whites (Bell et al, 1990). Mass media and the educational system have been shown to perpetuate negative Black male and female images (Benjamin, 1983; Caution & Baldwin, 1980; Jewell, 1983). These images influence African American couple's perceptions about each other (Bell et al, 1990). Sociological studies reveal that some black males perceive black women as emasculating and

aggressive. While black women perceive black men as passive and irresponsible. This evidence suggests that black men and women have internalized Eurocentric images of their heterosexual roles, and these roles contribute too much of the conflict in Black male-female relationships (Akbar, 1981; Amini, 1972; Braithewaite, 1982; Cade, 1970; Jewell, 1983; Mcgee, 1973).

In order to improve the relationship between African American couples it may be necessary to reframe their historical experience in America. Using the African value system to define self-esteem helps to counter the negative perceptions found in the psyche of the African American couple. Asante proposed a model of Black heterosexual relationships based on the African American worldview (1980, 1981). Asante describes a healthy Black heterosexual relationship as one that is regulated by an “Afrocentric imperative”. This means the spiritual and intellectual commitment of Black couples to the cultural affirmation of their people. Asante based his idea of an Afrocentric cultural basis on four components that include sacrifice, inspiration, vision, and victory.



Sacrifice is described as a value that prioritizes the spiritual character more than the physical in African American relationships (Asante, 1981). Couples should use their corporate responsibility and interdependence to improve their relationship to their family and community. Inspiration is defined as a value in mutual affirmation and support (Asante, 1980). The couple that practices inspiration encourages productive, creative work and responsibility. Asante's component labeled visionary emphasizes the importance of couples planning for the future of the community. This means that the couple should be committed to goals, accomplishments, and aspirations that assist in the empowerment of the black family.

The last value component in Asante's model is called victory. This component encourages couples to celebrate their achievements, aspirations and growth as an African people. Yvonne Bell, Cathie Bouie, and Joseph Baldwin conducted research that reframed the popular cultural deficit model associated with previous research efforts in this field (Bell, et al., 1990). Their research affirms the positive influence of African values within the Black heterosexual relationship. Instead of the negative images that can damage the

relationships of people of African slave descent, professionals must find resilience and worth within the value system of African Americans.

### Techniques and Theories

The narrative approach to family therapy is a perfect fit for couples of African descent. After reading Michael Whites thoughts on his term “problem-saturated description”, it became clear that client’s personal stories are often problem-focused (Nichols & Schwartz, 1995). This term refers to the negative events and personalities that are constantly brought to the foreground (Nichols & Schwartz, 1995). Family and friends who have attempted to solve the problem are exhausted and beaten by the problem (Nichols & Schwartz, 1995). The use of externalization helps clients develop some esteem by conceptually separating the problem from the person and giving it a reality of its own. This is why the series of questioning that examines the historical influence of the problem, is the next important step in Michael Whites reconstruction of stories (Nichols & Schwartz, 1995). These questions are asked in hopes of finding what White defines as unique

outcomes (Nichols & Schwartz, 1995). Unique outcomes refer to the successes that were hidden by the problem.

Using terms from slavery to externalize problems between couples help to educate the couple as well as protect their self-esteem, which will be needed to overcome the problem (Nichols & Schwartz, 1995). This form of narrative therapy can help African American couples overcome the residuals of slavery by reminding them that: (1) the problem is not a reflection on them, (but it is a system of oppression); (2) they can control their problems (like Martin Luther King, Harriet Tubman, and Rosa Parks); (3) they are not the dominated people they have come to believe they are (instead, they are people who built civilizations).

African American couples often lose self-esteem when seen by professionals for a problem. The mere fact that a professional is involved reduces self-esteem for many African American couples. Further, many African Americans have learned to be distrustful of giving personal information that “the dominant system” might use to exploit or manipulate them. This too is reminiscent of slavery. The use of Michael White’s

rhetoric questions along with Asante's Afrocentric cultural consciousness is a powerful combination that could be used to lower their defenses and enhance relationships among African American couples.

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## Appendix

### Consent Form

I understand that by participating in this interview. I am giving my informed consent as a participating volunteer in this study. I understand the basic nature of the study and agree that any potential risks are exceedingly small. I also understand the potential benefits that might be realized from the successful completion of this study. I am aware that the information is being sought in the form of an interview and that my name will be replaced by a false name in order to maintain confidentiality. I realize that I have the right to refuse to participate and that my right to withdraw from participation at any time during the study will be respected with no coercion or prejudice.

NOTE: Questions or concerns about participation in the research or subsequent complaints should be addressed first to the researcher or research advisor and second to Dr. Ted Knous, Chair, UW-Stout Institutional Review Board for the protection of Human Subjects in Research, 11 HH, UW-Stout, Menomonie, WI, 54751, phone (715) 232-1126