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Beyond The Healthy Marriage Initiative: How Extension Agents Can Promote Healthy Relationships among Low-Income, Cohabitating African American Couples

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Abstract

With the establishment of the Healthy Marriage Initiative (HMI), various national, state, and local programs have been created to encourage marriage, particularly among low-income African-American cohabitating couples with children. However, extension agents have little guidance regarding how they can promote healthy relationships among these couples, many of whom may not be ready to marry. To address this paucity, I will provide recommendations regarding how extension agents can effectively promote healthy relationships among these families. Implications for extension include the importance of acknowledging personal attitudes toward marriage and cohabitation, recognizing the individual and collective factors that motivate couples to transition from cohabitation to marriage, as well as the ways that these relationships may be more vulnerable to dissolution.

Keyword: Cohabitation, African Americans, Extension, Healthy Relationships

Introduction

The social significance of marriage and cohabitation has changed in recent decades. Although generally viewed as one of the most important indicators of family stability, marriage immediately gained national attention when President Bush promised marriage strengthening would be one of the most important goals of his administration in 2000. In support of this promise to create stronger marriages, one year later, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services dedicated $100 million to research and program efforts related to marriage education (Ooms 2005). In addition to the general value that many individuals place on marriage, much of the support for marriage strengthening efforts has been substantiated by previous research. Specifically, in contrast to cohabitation, marriage has been found to positively contribute toward the health, longevity and emotional well-being of couples (Nock 2005; Ooms 1998), the

emotional and physical health of children (Santelli 2002), as well as the economic stability of families (U.S. Census Bureau 2001). Although the majority of Americans plan to marry and view a good marriage as more important than wealth, fame, good health and a good job (Kidder, 1988), an increasing number of African Americans who desire romantic involvement are choosing to establish romantic partnerships through cohabitation (Hoelter and Stauffer, 2002; McAdoo 1988; Seltzer 2000; Simmons and O'Connell 2003; Taylor, Jackson, and Chatters 1997).

The purpose of this article is to provide recommendations regarding how extension agents can best promote healthy relationships among low-income, cohabitating African American couples. More than two decades of intensive research has documented what has been commonly referred to as "the cohabitation effect" (Axinn and Thornton 1992; Brown 2000; Clarkberg, Stoltzenberg, and Waite 1995; Manning and Lamb 2003; Stanley, Rhoades and Markman 2006; Teachman 2003), which posits that couples that live together have certain characteristics that contribute to marital instability other than those who do not cohabit before marriage. However, given the increase of cohabitation in the United States, extension agents must be equipped to deal with the current realities that face many African American families. Over the past few years, a great deal of national attention that has been devoted to strengthening the relationships of African American couples who choose marriage for themselves (http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/aa_hmi/AAHMI.html). Knowledgeable extension agents can be especially instrumental in helping these families improve the quality of their relationships, regardless of whether they marry.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Cohabitation in the United States

Whereas cohabitation, and especially childbearing outside of marriage, had been met with social stigma in the past, much of this stigma has declined as more couples are now choosing cohabitation as a prelude to, or in place of marriage (Bumpass, Sweet, and Cherlin 1991; DeVita 1996; Fossett and Kiecolt 1993; Gibson-Davis, Edin and McLanahan 2005; Osborne, McLanahan and Brooks-Gunn 2003; Scott, Rhoades, and Markman 2006; Smock and Manning 2004). Currently, there are more than four million cohabitating couples in the United States, which is eight times the number of cohabitating couples in 1970 (U.S. Census Bureau 1999). In general, increases in cohabitation have been linked to several factors: increased longevity, an increase in the age of first marriage (Taylor, et al 1997), a desire for individuals to test the extent to which they may be compatible for marriage, or to create a "marriage-like" relationship, which may or may not include children (Bumpass, et al 1991).

Evidence of shifting attitudes regarding marriage can also be seen in the discrepancy between the numbers of women who are currently married. An article in the *New York Times*revealed that there are now more women who are living without a husband than women who are married. Interestingly, 51 percent of women said they were living without a spouse, which was what 39 and 49 percent of women reported in the years 1950 and 2000, respectively (U.S. Census Bureau 2005). A recent study found many women reject marriage because they enjoy their newfound independence as single women after ending long marriages, can devote more time to their careers as well as spend more time with family and friends (Roberts 2007). Fascinatingly, given the public's interest in creating strong marriages, 2005 marked the first time in history where there were fewer married couples than any other type of household. Although these women are not married, it would be illogical to assume that these women are not in a romantic relationship or that they are not currently cohabitating with their romantic partners.

Even though increased education and economic independence enjoyed by many women may inform their decision to marry or cohabitate, one must consider whether this current social trend is equally applicable to members of all racial and/or ethnic groups. Although society has generally experienced changes in marriage and cohabitation, these trends are especially prominent among African Americans, specifically Black women. To date, only 30 percent of Black women have a spouse, compared with about 49 percent of Hispanic women, 55 percent of non-Hispanic White women and more than 60 percent of Asian women (U.S. Census Bureau 2005). Additionally, regardless of the type of relationship in which they enter, African American romantic partnerships are more prone to dissolution. For example, when compared with Whites (62%) and Hispanics (60%), African Americans are less likely to marry (41%) (U.S. Census Bureau 2003), more likely to divorce and more likely to end their relationship with initial cohabitation to become a single-parent (Furstenberg 2001; Taylor, et al 1997; Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan 1995). Since the majority of the women who participated in the Roberts (2007) study were White and held moderate to high education and income levels, these findings may not be representative of many Black female relationships. In other words, the higher socioeconomic standing enjoyed by most Whites (Darity and Myers 1998), particularly White women since 1960 (Schaefer and Lamm 1995), may motivate these women to make different decisions regarding marriage and cohabitation than Black women, who as a group, do not enjoy the same socioeconomic status. Over the past several years, a growing number of studies have examined the role of SES on marriage and divorce trends in the United States. Interestingly, the findings regarding high SES couples are conflicting in that while some studies found these couples have a lower likelihood of divorce (Guttman 1993), others have revealed divorce among these couples is higher, especially when the woman earns more than her husband (Jalovaara 2003). Conversely, a low socioeconomic status has been associated with delayed marriage (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Edin and Reed 2005) and increased divorce rates (Mooney, Knox, and Schacht 2000). The results from these studies suggest that the decreased economic standing of African

Americans is associated with both their steady retreat from marriage and their higher likelihood of divorce.

Single Parenthood in the African American Community

The negative effects of increased rate of pregnancy and single parenthood in the Black community are well known among scholars and extension agents, and places these families at a higher risk for certain outcomes. For example, in addition to a higher likelihood of being poor (McLanahan and Booth 1989), Black, never-married mothers have higher rates of unemployment and are less likely than divorced or separated mothers to have completed high school (McLanahan and Casper 1995). In addition, Black never-married fathers have a slightly higher poverty rate (23.4% in 1995) than Whites (U.S. Census Bureau 1996). Furthermore, Black adults who are the products of single-parent families are generally less successful than children who grow up in two-parent homes (McLanahan and Casper 1995). Moreover, having a low income is one of the greatest disadvantages associated with single-parenthood, along with low levels of parental involvement and high levels of residential mobility (Osborne 2003; McLanahan and Casper 1995).

In addition to the ways in which adults are disadvantaged, lower rates of African American marriage may be especially problematic for African American children. According to the 2004 U.S. Census Bureau report, over 25 million children live apart from their biological fathers, a reality that touches 1 out of every 3 (34.5%) children in America. In addition, nearly 2 in 3 (65%) African American children, 4 in 10 (36%) Hispanic children, and nearly 3 in 10 (27%) White children live in fatherless homes, respectively. This is a problem because African American children born in single-parent households have a higher likelihood of living below the poverty level, residing in a dilapidated home, and living doubled up with other family members (McAdoo 1997). In addition, not only are African American children who live with one parent less likely to be in school at the age of 17, but they are also less likely to graduate from high school (U.S. Department of Education 2003). Furthermore, children of Black single mothers are at a higher risk of establishing a single parent household by the age of 16 than daughters of two-parent Black households (Murry, Bynum, Brody, Willert, and Stephens 2001). Moreover, Black children of single parents have higher rates of teenage and single motherhood, lower levels of educational attainment, and lower rates of labor force participation (McLanahan and Casper 1995). Also, Black daughters who spent even part of their childhood in a single-parent family because of parental marital disruption or because their parent never married are 36% more likely to have a teenage birth, 52% more likely to have a premarital birth, and 32% more likely to experience marital disruption (McLanahan and Bumpass 1988). Hogan and Kitagawa (1985) also found that Black adolescent girls from single-parent families are more likely to be sexually active and to have premarital births than adolescents from two-parent households.

In addition, the overrepresentation of Blacks in crime may also be related to the high rate of female-headed households, specifically the lack of a father in these households (Dallaire 2007; Glaze and Maruschak 2008; Mumola 2000). Single parents may not devote as much time to supervision and discipline and may be less effective in supervising general youth activities such as "hanging out" that may encourage juvenile delinquency (Flouri and Buchannan 2002; Matherne and Thomas, 2001). The foregoing remarks about single parenthood should not be interpreted to mean (a) that low-income Blacks have little or no interest in marriage and/or establishing healthy relationships with the father/mother of their child/children; and/or (b) that Black children reared by low-income, single parent families cannot succeed in life. Essentially, these studies strongly suggest that there are several risk factors associated with single and cohabiting households for children, adults, and communities when parents are not in a healthy and stable marital relationship. Although marriage and relationship stability are not necessarily synonymous, the potential benefits of marriage must be noted.

The Potential Benefits of Marriage

How marriage may benefit children. There are several ways in which children benefit from healthy marital relationships. For one, children living with married parents are generally safer than children living with single parents because they are less likely to be abused or neglected (Alan Guttmacher Institute 2003). In addition, when compared to children in single-parent families, children raised in married-parent homes have better emotional and physical health (Kiecolt-Glaser and Newton 2001) and engage in fewer risky behaviors, such as premarital sex, substance abuse, delinquency, and suicide (Santelli 2002). Furthermore, children with married parents do better academically and fare better economically than children reared by low-income, single-parents (Thomson, Hanson and McLanahan 1994). Strong marriages also provide a positive model of intimate relationships in that children raised in intact homes are less likely to cohabit and more likely to view marriage positively and maintain long-term marriages (Amato and DeBoer 2001).

How marriage may benefit adults. In addition to the ways in which children benefit when their parents are married, stable marriages also benefit the couple. For example, some studies have found married people generally have better emotional and physical health and live longer than unmarried people (Marks and Lambert 1998). In addition, in general, married couples have greater incomes than do single adults, and the longer they stay married, the more wealth they accumulate (U.S. Census Bureau 2001). Furthermore, married couples enjoy greater sexual satisfaction than do unmarried people (Laumann, Gagnon, and Michael 1994). Also, married women are generally safer because never-married, cohabiting, separated, and divorced women experience higher rates of domestic violence than do married women (Salari and Baldwin 2002). Clearly, poor marriages are detrimental to the physical, emotional, psychological, and financial

well-being of those who engage in them, however, when a marital relationship is stable, its benefits are numerous.

How marriage may benefit society. Marriage has also been shown to benefit society. For example, communities with more married-parent families are generally safer because they are less likely to have substance abuse and crime (U.S. Census Bureau 2002). Furthermore, marriage can be a possible antidote to poverty and welfare dependency for many Black families (Carlson, Garfinkel, McLanahan, Mincy, and Primus 2003; Sigle-Rushton, and McLanahan 2003; U.S. Census Bureau 2002). Married people are more likely than single and unmarried couples to be healthy, productive, and engaged citizens, benefiting businesses and, ultimately, the economy (Keyes 2002). Taken together, the aforementioned statistical data and empirical findings provide compelling evidence that strong marriages can positively benefit couples, children and African American communities.

The African American Healthy Marriage Initiative

Where marriage and family formation were once regarded as a relatively private sphere of family life, they now are the focus of public policy. Emerging directly from this new policy emphasis is the National Healthy Marriage Initiative (NHMI), perhaps the most influential federal initiative to promote marriage over the past several years (http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/about/mission.html#ms). The policy defines a "healthy" relationship as one that is "mutually enriching" and one in which there is mutual respect between spouses. The African-American Healthy Marriage Initiative (AAHMI), a component of the Administration for Children and Families' (ACF) NHMI "specifically promotes a culturally competent strategy for fostering healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood, improving child well-being and strengthening families within the African American Community" (http://www.aahmi.net). Since its inception, educators, counselors, social workers, program organizers, lawyers, attorneys, judges, religious leaders, and paraprofessionals involved with the AAHMI have created successful partnerships, focusing on the specific ways that healthy relationships in the form of marriage can be promoted on a local, state and national level.

Recommendations for Extension Agents

The benefits of stable, marital relationships are well known. How can extension agents promote healthy relationships among low-income, cohabitating African American couples? This section provides ten ways that extension specialists can encourage healthy relationships among this population. The recommendations provided herein are based on field notes that were written subsequent to conducting videotaped interviews with 30 cohabitating African American couples regarding their perceptions of emotional closeness and relationship commitment in their relationship. The participants were told during an initial explanatory phone call that I was

interested in learning about how couples describe their romantic relationship. Couples were asked whether they were currently living with their partner and if they would be interested in being interviewed together about their relationship. An incentive was offered to couples who completed the interview. If the couples agreed to participate in the study, I scheduled a time that was convenient for an interview in their home.

Methodology

The method for this study is drawn from the narrative interview developed by Holmberg, Orbuch and Veroff (2004) in which couples are guided through a structured protocol to construct a "collective narrative" or story of their relationship. They described their relationship from its beginning, where it is currently, and their future expectations regarding their relationship. A "storyline sheet" or timeline was used to help couples recall and describe in an orderly and chronological fashion how their relationship developed and various landmark moments in their relationship. Couples also completed several quantitative instruments.

Emotional Closeness

The four items that were added to Holmberg et al.'s (2004) protocol to tap couples' perceptions of emotional closeness questions were: (1) Describe what first attracted you to your partner/spouse; (2) When did you both know that you were a couple? Was there a specific event that occurred in your relationship that made you realize, "Okay, this means that we're a couple?" (3) Imagine that your partner/spouse was no longer in your life. What would you most miss about him or her?"; (4) Describe a time in your relationship when you felt most secure; and (5) Can you remember a specific time in your relationship when you were experiencing a lot of stress and you were deeply moved by the amount of protection and care that your partner/spouse showed you? Describe that time.

Commitment

The nine items that were added to Holmberg et al.'s (2004) interview protocol to assess couples' perceptions of commitment were: (1) What role did commitment play in your decision to move in together or get married?; (2) What does the term "commitment" mean to you both?; (3) When did you both know that you were a couple? Was there a specific event that occurred in your relationship that made you realize, "Okay, this means that we're a couple?" (4) Describe the moment in your relationship when you knew that you were committed to your spouse/partner; (5) Describe the moment in your relationship when you knew that your spouse/partner was committed to you; (6) What do you think motivated your partner to commit to you?; (7) Has there ever been a time when you thought that your relationship would end, but it didn't? (8) If so,

what kept you together?; and (9) How has being in a relationship with your partner expanded your view of commitment?

These questions were designed to help the couples reflect upon the development of emotional closeness and commitment in their relationship. The additional questions helped ensure that couples would explain, in their own words, what these constructs mean to them. A standard set of probe questions was used to help the couple reflect upon the development of emotional closeness and commitment in their relationship.

Coding system development

To identify the themes that emerged from the collective interviews, all interviews were content analyzed using a grounded theory and an open-coding process (Strauss and Corbin 1990; Taylor and Bogdan 1998). Coding systems were developed to summarize how couples experienced and described their relationship generally and their emotional closeness and commitment specifically. In keeping with open-coding techniques, no a priori categories were imposed on the narrative data. Inter-rater coding agreement on all themes was high, and the overall percent agreement for narrative coding was 86% (Chaney 2006).

Because emotional closeness (Busby, Christensen, Crane, and Larson 1995; Van den Broucke, Vertommen, and Vendereycken 1986), and commitment (Schwartz and Scott 2003) are two of the most important aspects of healthy and stable relationships, these families would especially benefit if extension agents were sensitive to several areas that were confirmed in my data, including the issues of: (1) being aware of their own values regarding cohabitation; (2) helping low-income, Black couples recognize why having a strong family is important; (3) helping these couples understand the ways that negative romantic partnerships are detrimental to their physical health; (4) understanding the structural and functional nature of families; (5) recognizing that many low-income, cohabitating Black couples desire marriage; (6) acknowledging couples who never plan to marry; (7) teaching these couples how to make sound financial decisions; (8) helping these men and women successfully co-parent; (9) developing programs that can increase the likelihood that incarcerated individuals can financially provide for their families; as well as (10) creating forums by which other low-income couples can share how they prepared for marriage and/or successfully overcame various challenges in their relationship.

In light of the many ways that healthy relationships can benefit individuals, children and society, I offer the following recommendations regarding how extension agents can encourage healthy relationships among low-income, cohabitating African Americans:

- Extension agents should be aware of their individual values and biases regarding couples who establish families through cohabitation. This means that extension agents must

recognize the specific ways in which their views toward cohabitation may be influenced by personal, religious or political values, or the parental structure in their own family of origin. Furthermore, this necessitates that extension agents not only be open to diverse family experiences, but recognize that the day-to-day family experiences of low-income, cohabitating Black couples may be less problematic than those of married, Black couples, especially when there exists a strong level of emotional closeness and commitment within the relationship.

- Extension agents must work harder to make low-income, cohabitating Black couples more aware why their families must be stronger. This involves making low-income, cohabitating Black families aware of the *specific* ways in which children emotionally, psychologically, and financially benefit when they are in a healthy and stable relationship. In addition, it is important that extension agents help these couples, many of whom were the product of single-parent families, feel more confident in their ability to have positive relationships with their children. In this respect, extension agents can concentrate on the tasks that couples are performing well. Collectively, these couples can be helped to realize that they can decrease the likelihood that their children will grow up in abject poverty, can take more of an active interest in their children's schooling, and decrease the incidence of teenage parenthood by monitoring their children's activities and associates.

- As related to the aforementioned, extension agents must help low-income, cohabitating African American couples understand the negative effects of poor relationships. Because poor social relationships have been found to weaken the health of individuals (Abbott & Freeth, 2008; Stolle, 2001; Wilkinson, 2000), extension agents must help these couples see the connection between being in a healthy relationship and their physical, emotional, and psychological well-being. Simply knowing about the potentially damaging health effects of a poor relationship will not automatically improve the relationship, however, it can be the first step in helping couple's identify the specific behaviors that contribute to relational success or failure. This knowledge can help minimize problems in their relationship, thereby increasing the quality of these relationships. Simply, these couples must be taught that having a good relationship is beneficial for their current and future health.

- Extension agents must understand low-income, cohabitating African American couples' attitudes regarding the *structural* and *functional* nature of families. Specifically, the "structural" nature of families is related to whether the family is a two-parent or single-parent home with or without the support of extended family. The "functional" nature of families speaks to the amount of emotional, psychological, financial or spiritual assistance that individuals believe that they should receive from their partner. Extension agents can be especially instrumental in this respect by creating opportunities for

cohabitating couples to share the joys and challenges of being reared in a single and/or dual-parent home. Furthermore, couples can also be encouraged to pinpoint and articulate the specific ways that their partner can better support them in the relationship. In my research, I found that many couples disagreed on the functional nature of family. Although the importance of the extended family in the Black community is well-known among scholars (Taylor, Jackson, and Chatters 1997; Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan 1995), 40% of the couples in this study expressed disagreement and/or frustration regarding the role of extended family. Extension agents can help minimize conflict in this area by helping these couples establish boundaries that would support their collective family goals and maintain positive and supportive relationships with extended family.

- Extension agents must recognize that many low-income, cohabitating African American couples have marriage as a goal. Interestingly, 90% of the couples in this study planned to marry one day and 47% of these couples reported being engaged for some time or becoming recently engaged. Therefore, it is important that extension agents understand the attitudes and perceived barriers to marriage among these couples. Recent research has found social and economic barriers to be the primary reasons why many cohabitating African-American and low-income couples are not married (Edin and Reed 2005). In addition, Edin and Reed (2005) revealed barriers to marriage in this group that included attitudes about marriage that place matrimony on an esteemed pedestal, attitudes regarding the standard of living that should precede marriage coupled with the reality of the male's low economic status, as well as the quality of the relationship. In addition to not assuming that low-income, cohabitating Black couples have little regard for marriage, extension agents can provide concrete recommendations for how these families can better transition from cohabitation to marriage. Specifically, these couples can be helped by learning effective ways of communicating with one another, advancing their education, establishing good credit, and pursuing homeownership.

- Conversely, extension agents must recognize that some cohabitating couples do not have marriage as a goal. Although only 10% of the couples in this study expressed that they did not have plans to marry, this number may represent a growing number of couples who have little or no faith in the institution of marriage, an aversion to divorce, or doubts regarding the long-term stability of marriage, that they would rather not marry at all. Many of these couples may have been previously married (25% of the couples in this study had been previously married) or witnessed such a high level of conflict in their parental relationships that they have negative attitudes regarding the institution of marriage. Given these possibilities, extension agents can develop programs that can help these couples communicate with one another in more effective ways, demonstrate mutual respect for one another, and create mutually-agreed upon short and long-term goals for their relationship.

- Extension agents must be especially sensitive to the economic barriers that low-income, cohabitating Black couples perceive to their ability to marry. Specifically, this involves helping low-income, cohabitating African Americans make sound financial decisions. Although the median income for these couples was in the $10,000 to $19,999 range, most (40%) had an annual income of less than $10,000; 33% had an annual income between $10,000 and $19,999; 20% had an income between $20,000 and $29,999; and only 7% had an income between $50,000 and $59,999. Since most of these couples had an average of two children, their annual incomes placed them as members of the poor and/or working poor. Specifically, extension agents can teach these couples the wisdom of developing and collectively maintaining a budget that would allow them to more adequately meet their family's basic needs.

- Given the increasing number of cohabitating couples who have children from previous relationships (Edin and Reed 2005), extension agents must acknowledge that many African American couples are in complex, non-traditional interdependent situations that may include children who belong to each partner individually and to the cohabitating pair. Specifically, extension agents must help low-income, cohabitating African Americans learn how to successfully co-parent. Interestingly, 43% of the couples in this study had at least one biological child together, 37% had at least one child from a previous relationship and no biological children together; and 20% did not have any children. Of the couples that engaged in co-parenting, over half (60%) reported conflict between themselves and their partner's previous partner. Extension agents can help these couples see that minimal conflict between the parents and/or guardians is in the best interest of the child. They can stress the importance of consistent parenting between all individuals responsible for the child's care as well the importance of helping the new partner transition into the parental role.

- Extension agents must help make the transition from prison to home and community an easier one for many low-income Black men and women. Although only ten percent (10%) of the individuals in this study previously were incarcerated and had been recently released from prison (less than two years prior to our interview), all of these individuals expressed the desire to better financially provide for their families but believed that they lacked the opportunity and/or confidence to do so. Because African Americans are more likely to experience unemployment or underemployment than Whites (Mason 1996), extension agents can develop programs that can help these individuals make a better transition into the working world. Specifically, these individuals would benefit from programs related to resume writing, professional dress and grooming, and professional protocol before, during and after the job interview.

- Extension agents must provide culturally-appropriate models that can help low-income, cohabitating African American families have healthy relationships and/or make a

successful transition to marriage. Essentially, this could involve having other Black couples who are in healthy relationships share their relationship challenges, as well as how they successfully overcame these challenges, with other cohabitating couples. In addition, these couples can share the specific ways that they prepared for marriage during the cohabitation period. Some of these recommendations may include, but not be limited to, the value of advancing their education, finding a higher-paying job, making a conscious effort to communicate with their partner in more effective ways, verbally acknowledging the daily sacrifices made by their partner, as well as the specific ways in which they work to develop emotional closeness and commitment with their partner via shared, quality time on a weekly or monthly basis.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to provide recommendations regarding how extension agents can best encourage healthy relationships among low-income, cohabitating African Americans. Although there are a growing number of governmental efforts to encourage and promote marriage (Brotherson and Duncan 2004), given current statistics, extension agents can expect the number of families formed by cohabitation to increase. In addition, these agents must recognize that many low-income cohabitating Black couples may experience real and perceived barriers to marriage. The information presented here can help extension agents develop quality programs that can help low-income African Americans understand why having a *stable relationship,* marital or not, is important both for the adults and the children in the relationship. The benefits for the individual, the couple, and the children are numerous. Specifically, healthier relationships can decrease the number of African Americans who live in poverty (McLanahan and Booth 1989), the number of children who reside in single-parent homes (McAdoo 1997), the number of never-married, unemployed mothers (McLanahan and Casper 1995), as well as the high levels of residential mobility (McLanahan and Casper 1995) that exist among these families. Essentially, whether or not they decide to marry, it is imperative that low-income cohabitating African Americans create healthy relationships. The capstone point is that extension agents must acknowledge the varying values, experiences, and perceptions of low-income, cohabitating Black couples. In order to go beyond the goals that have been set forth by the Healthy Marriage Initiative, extension agents can provide much needed societal supports to help these couples create stronger families that will benefit them now and for generations to come.

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