



Emotional Closeness and Commitment among African American Couples: Implications for Promoting Relationship Stability

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“A man (or woman) must understand that his (her) decisions are binding and there is *real* import to *real* decisions. Marriage is such an important lesson in manhood (womanhood) development. It is no wonder that every society requires some form of it.”

Dr. Na'im Akbar, *Visions of Men*
(1991, p. 13)



The Problem

- ◆ **When compared with Whites (62%) and Hispanics (60%), the marriage rate among AA's is the lowest (41%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002).**
- ◆ **A single-parent family has a higher likelihood of being poor (McLanahan & Booth, 1989).**
- ◆ **Never-married mothers have higher rates of unemployment & less likely than divorced or separated mothers to have completed high school (McLanahan & Casper, 1995).**



Why It Is Important To Promote Relationship Stability Among African Americans

- ◆ Most AA's desire to be married (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995).
- ◆ Most AA's desire a strong marriage (Glenn, 1990; Kidder, 1988).
- ◆ Beneficial to the AA couple (Salari & Baldwin, 2002).
- ◆ Increase likelihood the physical, emotional, behavioral, academic and economic welfare of AA children is enhanced (The Alan Guttmacher Institute, 2003, Kelleher, 2000, Santelli, 2002, Thomson, Hanson & McLanahan, 1994).



The Current Study

- ◆ Investigated how married & cohabitating AA's defined & experienced emotional closeness (EC) & commitment to their romantic partner.
- ◆ Evaluated how AA men and women experience EC & commitment.
- ◆ Examined how relationship satisfaction is related to perceptions of EC & commitment.



Significance of Current Study

- ◆ **Very little empirical research about AA relationships.**
- ◆ **Contributes to the relationship stability research – reveals how married/cohabitating AA's describe and experience EC & commitment.**
- ◆ **Investigated gender differences in how AA men & women's perception of EC & commitment.**



Research Questions

- ◆ **How do married and cohabitating African Americans define and experience emotional closeness to their partner/spouse?**
- ◆ **How do married and cohabitating African Americans define and experience commitment to their partner/spouse?**
- ◆ **How do the emotional closeness and commitment narratives created by men and women in married and cohabitating relationships differ from one another?**



Hypotheses

- 1) Married African Americans will experience higher levels of emotional closeness than cohabitating African Americans.**
- 2) Married African Americans will experience higher levels of commitment in comparison to cohabitating couples.**
- 3) There will be differences in the narratives provided by African American men and women regarding how they describe and experience emotional closeness and commitment.**



Method - Participants

- **21-45 years of age;**
- **Married/cohabitating (1-15 years);**
- **With & without children**
- **Lower socioeconomic background**
- **Recruited via church referrals & snowball sampling**



Method - Participants

Married	Cohabiting
Female Age: 35.71 yrs. - Education: 12.55 yrs.	Female Age: 28.27 yrs. - Education: 12.30 yrs.
Male Age: 37.32 yrs. - Education: 12.03 yrs.	Male Age: 29.93 yrs. - Education: 11.77 yrs
Average Length of Marriage: 9.98 yrs.	Average Length of Cohabitation: 5.21 yrs.
Income: \$20-\$29,999	Income: \$10-\$19,999
45%/cohab./55% not cohab.	47% engaged/53% not engaged



Method - Procedure

The Initial Explanatory Telephone Call

- ◆ **Informed of collective interview & completion of several questionnaires**
- ◆ **Monetary compensation to thank couples for their time**
- ◆ **Prior to participation, written consent form & demographics questionnaire completed by the couples**



Methods - Interview Protocol

- ◆ Based on the work of Holmberg, Orbuch and Veroff (2004)
- ◆ Couples' constructed a "collective narrative" or story of their relationship (beginning, current, & future expectations)
- ◆ A "storyline sheet" or timeline was given to couples
- ◆ Questions regarding EC & commitment were added to Holmberg et al's (2004) original protocol



Emotional Closeness & Commitment Questions

- ◆ **Emotional Closeness**: “Describe a time when you felt most secure,” “When did you both know you were a “couple?” Was there a specific event in your relationship that made you realize, “Okay, this means that we’re a couple?”
- ◆ **Commitment**: “What role did commitment play in your decision to move in together/get married?” “What does the term “commitment” mean to you both?” “Describe the moment you knew you were committed to your partner/spouse”



Results – Engaged vs. Non-Engaged Cohabiting Couples

- ◆ Engaged cohabiting couples reported higher levels of EC on the Rubin Love scale than non-engaged cohabiting couples.
- ◆ Engaged cohabiting couples earned higher scores on MIQ Openness scale than non-engaged cohabiting couples.
- ◆ Non-engaged cohabiting couples reported less commitment than cohabiting couples who were engaged.
- ◆ No differences between engaged & non-engaged cohabiting couples when responding to items on the relationship satisfaction scale.



Results – Cohabitated Before Marriage vs. Did Not Cohabitate Before Marriage

- ◆ Couples who did not cohabit before marriage reported higher EC on the Rubin Love scale than couples who did cohabit before marriage.
- ◆ Couples who cohabitated before marriage reported higher levels of openness on the MIQ Openness scale than couples who did not cohabit prior to marrying.
- ◆ Marginal effect between premarital cohabitation & perceptions of commitment: couples who cohabitated reported greater commitment than couples who had not cohabitated prior to marriage.
- ◆ Couples who cohabitated prior to marriage were not significantly more satisfied with their relationship than couples who did not cohabit prior to marriage.



Summary of Survey Results

- ◆ Cohabiting couples who planned to marry reported higher levels of love, openness & commitment than cohabiting couples without plans to marry.
- ◆ Married couples who cohabitated prior to marriage reported higher levels of love, openness & commitment than couples who had not cohabitated prior to marriage.
- ◆ Men and women had similar perceptions of EC.
- ◆ Relationship satisfaction not related to intent to marry or premarital cohabitation patterns.



Narrative Results:

Attraction to Partner/Spouse

- ◆ Both couples likely to report attraction based on their partner's physical appearance.
- ◆ Married couples more likely to say the way their partner made them feel was impetus for their initial attraction.
- ◆ No significant effects for gender regarding physical appearance.
- ◆ The way that their partner made them feel was voiced by more females than males in both relationships.

Narrative Results:

Realizing They Were a “Couple”

- ◆ Both couples likely to report knowing they were a “couple” (certain marker in relationship, affection & sex, raising children, or time & money).
- ◆ No significant associations with respect to gender.





Narrative Results:

What They Would Miss

- ◆ Married couples were more likely to miss their partners' personality than cohabitating couples.
- ◆ Cohabitating couples were more likely to miss affection and sex if the relationship ended.
- ◆ No significant associations were found for relationship status and reports of missing the activities that they shared with their spouse and everything if their partner were no longer in their life.
- ◆ Married females were more likely than their husbands to say that they would miss the activities they shared.



Narrative Results: Feeling Secure

- ◆ Supportive behaviors of their spouse made married couples feel secure in their relationship.
- ◆ No significant associations between both groups regarding the consistent presence of their partner (always and presence) and not feeling secure in the relationship.
- ◆ No significant associations emerged with respect to gender.



Narrative Results:

Care During Times of Stress

- ◆ Both couples equally likely to report protection/defense of partner, financial/legal support, medical situation/illness/death, or not being able to remember a time when they felt secure as moments during their relationship when their partner showed them protection and care.
- ◆ Married males more likely than their wives to indicate financial/legal support to be a stressful time when their spouse expressed protection & care.



Summary of Results for Emotional Closeness Narratives

- ◆ **Treatment/the way their partner made them feel was important to females.**
- ◆ **Same events made married & cohabitating men and women realize they were a “couple.”**
- ◆ **Married couples more likely to miss partners’ personality, cohabitating couples more likely to miss affection & sex, married females would miss shared activities.**
- ◆ **Supportive behaviors of their spouse made married couples feel secure in the relationship. Both couples reported (always and presence) strongly contributed to their feeling secure in the relationship.**
- ◆ **Married males more likely than their wives to indicate that a stressful situation requiring financial or legal support were times when their spouse showed them protection and care.**



Narrative Results:

Deciding to Marry/Live Together

- ◆ Married couples more likely than cohabitating couples to state that feelings of commitment played a strong role in their decision to be together.
- ◆ Cohabitating couples were more likely than married couples to say that they already felt committed to their partner or that commitment played little or no role in their decision to live together.
- ◆ No significant associations with respect to gender.



Narrative Results: The Meaning of Commitment

- ◆ Married couples more likely than cohabitating couples to state that ensuring their spouses well-being was the essential meaning of commitment.
- ◆ No significant associations with respect to gender.



Narrative Results:

How Individuals Knew They Were Committed

- ◆ Married & cohabitating couples equally likely to report that relationship markers, emotional commitment, and physical attraction as events when they realized that they were committed to their partner or spouse.
- ◆ No significant gender effects were apparent for either cohabitating or married couples.

Narrative Results:

How Individuals Knew Their Partner/Spouse Was Committed

- ◆ Married & cohabitating couples equally likely to say a relationship marker, emotional commitment and physical attraction were indicants that their partner or spouse was committed to them.
- ◆ No significant associations with respect to gender.



Narrative Results:

What Motivates Commitment

- ◆ Married & cohabitating couples believe sexuality, caring, dedication, values/interests, relationship with God and children motivated their partner/spouse to make a personal commitment to them.
- ◆ No significant associations with respect to gender.





Narrative Results:

Thoughts of Ending Commitment

- ◆ Responses based upon rating scale (1 = yes, many times; 2 = yes; 3 = not often; and 4 = no), a one-way ANOVA test was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference between the mean responses of married & cohabitating couples.
- ◆ Both couples equally likely to report there were times when they thought that their relationship would end.
- ◆ No significant gender effects.

Narrative Results:

What Keeps Couples Together In Threat of Ending A Commitment

- ◆ Married couples more likely to report that their dedication to one another was the key factor keeping them together when their relationship was threatened.
- ◆ No significant associations between the responses of cohabitating and married couples regarding children, communication and a spiritual connection in helping them to remain with their partner/spouse.





Narrative Results:

Expanding Views of Commitment

- ◆ Married couples more likely than cohabitating couples to discuss commitment as something that develops & grows over time.
- ◆ Cohabitating couples more likely to indicate no major changes in their understanding of commitment as their relationship developed.
- ◆ Both couples equally likely to say commitment involved moving from thinking about commitment in terms of “me to us.”
- ◆ Married males more likely than their wives to report their understanding of commitment grew & developed as their relationship matured.



Summary of Results for Commitment Narratives

- ◆ Married couples more likely to say commitment played a strong role in their decision to be together.
- ◆ Cohabiting couples more likely to already feel committed to their partner & more likely to report commitment played little/no role in decision to live together.
- ◆ Married couples more likely to state ensuring their spouses well-being as essential meaning of commitment. Males & females voiced similar views about the meaning of commitment.
- ◆ Both couples reported a sense of emotional commitment & specific relationship markers as key factors that made them feel committed to their partner/spouse. Men & women gave similar responses.



Summary of Results for Commitment Narratives (cont.)

- ◆ Same events helped both couples realize their partner/spouse was committed to them.
- ◆ Both couples equally likely to report many times when they thought their relationship would end, but dedication kept them together.
- ◆ Married couples more likely to view commitment in a developmental way as well as married males.
- ◆ Cohabiting couples more likely to report no major changes in their understanding of commitment as their relationship developed.



Results: Relationship Satisfaction (Cohabiting Couples)

- ◆ Higher levels of consensus when cohabitating couples reported more love & fewer intimacy problems.
- ◆ Greater satisfaction when cohabitating couples reported fewer intimacy problems.
- ◆ No significant associations were found between the measures of relationship satisfaction and feelings of commitment for cohabitating couples.



Results: Relationship Satisfaction (Married Couples)

- ◆ Married couples were more likely to report greater consensus in their relationship when there was higher levels of love & lower levels of commitment.
- ◆ Scores on the RDAS satisfaction scale was correlated only with higher levels of commitment. Cohesion in the marital relationship was linked with greater love, fewer intimacy problems, less openness, less enjoyment, & greater commitment.



Conclusions - Emotional Closeness

- ◆ **Cohabiting couples who intend to marry/emotionally closer to partner**
- ◆ **Couples who did not cohabit before marriage experienced greater consensus, yet those who lived together before marriage experienced greater openness**
- ◆ **Women in both groups attracted to the way their partner made them feel**
- ◆ **Same events help both couples realize they are a “couple”**
- ◆ **Personality means more to married couples, affection & sex to cohabiting couples, & shared activities to married females if their spouse were no longer in their life.**
- ◆ **Supportive behaviors make married couples feel secure in their relationship & married males feel protected/cared for when their wives provide them financial/legal support.**



Conclusions - Commitment

- ◆ Non-engaged cohabitating couples were less committed; cohabitation before marriage contributed to greater commitment; & married more committed.
- ◆ Commitment was especially important to married couples & less so for cohabitating couples.
- ◆ Ensuring their spouses well-being was essential meaning of commitment for married couples.
- ◆ The same events helped married & cohabitating couples realize they were committed to their partner/spouse & that their partner/spouse was committed to them.



Conclusions – Commitment

- ◆ Both couples feel motivated to commit to their partner for the same reasons.
- ◆ The likelihood of both couples' relationships ending is the same, dedication helps married couples stay together when their relationship was threatened.
- ◆ Married couples/developmental way; cohabitating couples/ no major changes in their understanding of commitment as their relationship developed/married males more likely than married females to report understanding of commitment grew & developed as relationship matured.



What Does The Term “Commitment” Mean To You Both? (Married Couple #51)

F: Well commitment to me means that I am firmly resolved you know in my heart that this relationship I want to keep for the rest of my life. And I want to do all that I can to maintain it healthy, happy, peaceful, and um, and moving forward. I’m committed all the way. So whatever happens to him happens to me. And so that’s what it’s all about.

M: So commitment has to be making sure regardless, come what may that you know that’s how can I put it, when the Bible says the two will become one flesh. If I’m upset with myself, ain’t nothing I can do but I can’t get rid of myself, so I can’t get rid of my mate because we are one. So to me that’s what commitment is. Commitment is I’m no longer me, it’s us.



What Does The Term “Commitment” Mean To You Both? (Cohabiting Couple #59)

F: Commitment is a strong, powerful word. Like I say, you gotta push for it if you want it, if you want it to get better. But I don't, I don't do nothing about it, I'm go be honest with you, I don't expect for him to do nothing about our committed relationship. If we going down in our committed relationship, we get on our knees and we pray about everything. Prayer. That's what we do as far as our commitment with one another.

I: So _____, what does the term “commitment” mean to you?

M: Just like she say, that's a strong word and a lot of people don't know the meaning of the commitment. I take that very seriously because, I mean, when I'm committed to you, you know, to you and you only. I don't have any friend, no female friends, I don't need none, you my friend, I'm committed to you.

F: Right.

M: So I mean, what is the point of being committed when you have other friends that you can talk...no, it's just a strong word, and I feel as though I know the meaning of it and I live by it. You know, and I feel as though she lives by it too. So I mean, that's a strong word, but we know the meaning of it and we live by it.



What Does The Term “Commitment” Mean To You Both? (Married Couple #58)

F: To me commitment means being honest with one another, trusting each other and listening to his values and keeping things in consideration, that I need to be concerned about a lot of things, instead of me just going on doing this and that.

M: Trust. You got that trust, you can take it from there, and number one is the Lord. He made us so strong cause we got married in the church, a small church. And it was good.



What Does The Term “Commitment” Mean To You Both? (Cohabiting Couple #16)

F: Commitment means sharing and caring about each other. Letting your eyes wander but your heart never does. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Be good to each other.

M: I can look at another woman, smile, but I never look at them like I look at her.



What Does The Term “Commitment” Mean To You Both? (Married Couple #56)

F: Death do you part.

M: You said it.

F: Death do us part.

M: Death do us part. And that’s the end of that story.

F: Death do us part.

M: That’s the commitment.



Potential Outcomes

- ◆ **Can help promote strong relationships among AA's by providing educational curricula aimed at building EC & commitment among AA's in various relationship stages:**
 - * **Thinking about Cohabitation/Cohabiting**
 - * **Thinking about Engagement/Engaged**
 - * **Thinking about Marriage/Married**
- ◆ **Deliverables can be used by service providers, family life educators, policymakers and AA couples themselves.**
- ◆ **Result in web-based resources that may be developed for AA couples, practitioners, clergy & educators.**



Specific Outcomes

- ◆ Giving AA's knowledge regarding why relationship stability (in the form of marriage) is beneficial for themselves, their children, & their community
- ◆ Linking dating, cohabitating, & married couples with AA couples who have stable & healthy marriages
- ◆ Providing no-cost “relationship/parental counseling” and/or “community relationship workshops” to AA couples



“In order to discover the potential of your bigger self, you must jump into the water of husbandhood (not just engage in “shacking” because it is a game and fails to take full responsibility for your actions). One can learn only if he (she) takes full responsibility and deals with the consequences of his (her) actions.”



“Shacking offers a trap door. Though marriage is escapable, one does not escape without learning a thorough lesson in decisions, actions, and consequences. So learning occurs even in a failed marriage. Shacking lets you play the husband game without being a real husband, and this is the way of the “boys.”



“You will never learn the role of husbanding until you decide to be a husband – not a roommate, a *husband*. You have got to know what it means to be with this person (for better or worse) and not be able to get away on just a whim....



You have got to experience the kind of instructional pressure that comes from being bound with a person socially, legally, spiritually, and psychologically. The legal paper is not the key to helping you grow into a man, the key is learning the meaning and responsibility that goes with commitment. It is the commitment that begins to cultivate you.”

Dr. Na'im Akbar, *Visions of Men*
(1991, pp. 12-13)



*“A woman is a flower in a garden;
her husband is the fence around
it”* - Mbiti, 1991, p. 89



Thank You For Your Attention!