

Working with African American Individuals, Couples, and Families Expert Panel Podcast Transcript

July 2014

Voiceover:

Welcome to the National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families. Our goal is to promote the value of healthy marriage and relationship education skills, and encourages their integration into safety-net service systems as a holistic approach to strengthening families.

This podcast highlights some of the best moments from our February 2014 Expert Panel discussing Working with African American Individuals, Couples, and Families. The Panel and this podcast discuss how providers can improve services to African American families by better understanding cultural nuances that may impact service delivery. It also highlighted a number of Resource Center products that are available online at HealthyMarriageAndFamilies.Org.

In today's podcast you'll hear a conversation between Charisse Johnson, Branch Chief for the Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Discretionary Grant Program with the Office of Family Assistance at The Administration for Children and Families; Dr. Tera Jordan an Associate Professor in the Department of Human Development and Human Studies at Iowa State University; Kenneth Braswell, Director of the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse; Nisa Muhammad, founder of Wedded Bliss Foundation; and Dr. Rosario Slack, pastor, curriculum developer, and direct services provider.

The Panel was moderated by Robyn Cenizal, a senior manager with ICF International, who serves as the Project Director for the National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families.

To start the conversation, Robyn Cenizal looked to Ms. Charisse Jonson for some clarity around the value of relationship education and to set-up for the entirety of the panel.

Robyn Cenizal:

Your agency provides oversight to all of these grantees around the country that do this work, including the Resource Center. From your perspective, what value does the federal government see in investing in marriage and relationship education programming?

Charisse Johnson:

We're thinking about access to resources. Some of the education parts of this program, families may not typically have access to these resources, so through the classes and things like that in the community, you know you have access to things that you may not typically have access to. We're also thinking about how can we promote and strengthen families. What are the things that need to happen in a community that's driven by the community uniquely?

So when we think about the reason of why we put the \$75 million into Healthy Marriage, it's because we really want to see how we can strengthen communities? How can we

build communities? How can we reach families where they are to meet their unique needs? How can we allow communities to work together through partnerships to really think about how you integrate this work into the community at large? And really how to see what really works, whether it be through research projects or whether it's through just getting information through the success stories from the community on what works, and really to strengthen this field. We know that families need help. We know that families, you know, want to do better. We know that families want to be strong.

Voiceover:

As the panel kicked into gear a poll was taken asking “how many single fathers are in the US?” - about 37% of the audience said 1million to 1.5million, which wasn't too far off the 1.96 million single head of household fathers. Take a listen as the conversation continued, beginning with Kenneth Braswell.

Kenneth Braswell:

I think it's important to allow people to kind of understand the number with respect to single fathers. It's not an indicator of those who are engaged in fatherhood, it's an indicator of relationship. Just like it is with single moms, it's an indicator of where their parenting resources are coming from with respect to who is living in the home.

The National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse begins to allow us to create an umbrella platform for the work of Responsible Fatherhood across the country and insuring that we do provide the kinds of resources that men need to be adequate and responsible, healthy, loving fathers in the lives of their children, and to able to receive the kinds of services that they need to do so.

The Ad Council did a survey about a year ago and found that 97 percent of all dads in this country say that when their children were born it was the best day of their lives. That says something. It says that fathers are just and have the biggest desires to be in the lives of their children. That where they stumble and where they have problems is in access, services, and sometimes some of the other stuff as well. But it's really their ability to be able to understand, and I think a lot of times we often believe that parents, both moms and dads receive a manual when children are born. Neither of us receive a manual and we do the best that we can, given the resources that we have and given what we were taught growing up, to be great parents in our lives.

Robyn Cenizal:

What I hear you saying is that we need to think about these families as unique individuals. Everybody's situation might be different, so we need to think differently about what services that they need.

Which I think fits very well with the work associated with the Working with African American Individuals, Couples and Families Toolkit that you worked on for us, Dr. Slack. It attempts to address broader issues affecting African American families. So why did you think that it was so important to recognize cultural nuances when serving families?

Rosario Slack:

I'm ecstatic to be alive to see this day come where we get the opportunity to talk specifically about the nuances of what it means to be Black in America, and to recognize that being Black is okay and that there are individual needs that Black people have. Many people like to say, African American, I still prefer Black. But politically it's African American, but for me it's Black. Because it – it incorporates the fact that blackness is not something that is just American. It is something that spans the globe and there's a oneness that is not often embraced as we deal with people in America.

Voiceover:

Dr. Slack continued the conversation of the importance of understanding the African American culture and clients, the nuances and feelings that may be present when interacting with individuals and families.

Rosario Slack:

When you don't understand something, you're afraid of it. A when you're afraid of something you don't explore it. And if a person is not understood, then they are realigned or misaligned. In America Black families have been redefined, mis-defined and misaligned, and when we talk about including them in the big picture of the marriage movement, which many of us have been a part of for years, we have to recognize that there was some curricula that just did not jive with the experience of Black people in America. And just because you change that at the end and say "for Black couples," the content still was not sensitive in many ways to what the reality of the people of color had experienced.

Robyn Cenizal:

In the Toolkit you talk about a concept called code switching as it relates to communication. Tell us a little bit about what that is and why it's important for social service providers to understand that concept.

Rosario Slack:

Having been a social service provider for years, I recognize code switching even within the culture, as I was dealing with the Black person sometimes they would start saying things that they knew I didn't know anything about. But what they were doing is they were reverting back to their comfort zone and they were highlighting the fact that I was not understanding them at that time. That I was not making a connection. So what they did, they reverted to speaking in a language that they understood, but that they knew that I did not understand. So it was their defense mechanism to embrace their humanity and to accept that "this is who I am", but then if I were to then show them that I was concerned, by like asking a follow up question "What do you mean by that?" that embraces their humanity and brings them back in and helps them to know that I am concerned about them.

Sometimes it is to regain ground. If you're talking to me like I don't understand something, if I can code switch and change the vernacular, I can rise right back above you and let you know without even telling you that you're not as smart as I am. Not me,

just people. So I think a lot of times service providers need to be sensitive to the fact that none of us know all of it, and that everybody has their own, and they have a right to embrace their own experience and that we should not belittle that experience.

Voiceover: Kenny Braswell elaborated on the topic of code switching:

Kenneth Braswell:

You know I think also code switching is also seeking a place of comfort. We see it in languages; we see it as we deal with Latinos around the country. When Rosario talked earlier about using the term Black and encompassing the world experience, it's just not African Americans from Africa, but it's people from Haiti, it's people from Ghana, it's people from London. At every instance that you meet them they look for a space of comfort. So even amongst friends of us who happen to be Black, just as a for instance, if there are two people, one from Haiti and then the other from Haiti who didn't know each other and in a connection they find out they're from, automatically they start speaking their own language. Because it's a place of comfort for them, and it brings them back to a place that they both now understand that they are a culture within a culture. Having to understand both of them and also knowing when it's appropriate to move in either one of the lanes.

Voiceover:

The conversation later switched to marriage within the African American community. Here we asked "what percentage of African American women have married" to discuss the myth of marriage being a non-starter in the African American community.

Robyn Cenizal:

So the majority of our viewers selected 30-40 percent, and as you saw in the video the actual percentage is 57 percent of Black women have been married. So it's interesting that to some degree they myth continues. So following that, Tera, a lot of your research has been focused on relationships in the African American community. What does the research tell us about the general view of marriage within the African American community, and how do these views affect relationship patterns?

Tera Jordan:

The research has been pretty clear in that in the African American community we still hold a very strong symbolic significance for marriage. And that at one point or another when people are ready they do desire to marry. And I think I want to emphasize "when they are ready." The means by which people are ready are different than they used to be. It used to be a function of age, it used to be a function of perhaps finishing high school. And now, you know, the bar is really raised quite a bit, where people want to marry after perhaps they've finished a college education, or perhaps after they've moved into a home or secured other financial assets, or perhaps purchased a car. And so those bars are different than they were in my grandparent's generation where you bought those things together, that's why we got married. Today it's "No, we need to set those things up first," in order to perhaps stabilize the marriage. And so in that respect the pathways to marriage have changed. They are still very present in the African American community, but they are a little bit delayed.

Robyn Cenizal:

Nisa, you and Rosario developed a *Basic Training for Couples* series together. Can you give us an example of how this curriculum actually reflects cultural competency, which we've heard is so important as it relates to African American couples, and why again that's so important?

Nisa Muhammad:

I think part of what it is that Rosario and I found is that when we were doing work and we were doing direct services with families and couples, we were looking at curriculum that we felt didn't meet the needs of the couples and the families that we were doing work with. "Where is the curriculum for Black people? Where is the curriculum that addresses our needs and concerns?"

And we did our research and what were the needs of African American couples and families in terms of a curriculum to help them learn how to form and sustain healthy marriages and healthy relationships. One of the things that we found, which is the first week of our curriculum is called "Why Marriage?" Because too often for a lot of people in the Black community, if you ask them "Why marriage?" they say "We want to know that too."

So that's how ours starts out, by helping people understand why marriage is even important. Because if you don't understand why marriage is important, you may learn how to communicate better, you may be able to manage your conflict, you may be able to commit to something, but then after a while "I'm done with it, I'm moving on to the next person." Because you really don't have an understanding of why marriage is important. And so that's one of the nuances I think that's really critical in our work, is that we start out by talking about why marriage.

Robyn Cenizal:

Great. Rosario, you want to add anything?

Rosario Slack:

It's so hard to add anything to what Nisa says. Other people were trying to say well you can tweak it, you can take any curriculum and tweak it. But the problem of tweaking is often the tweaker. And if you don't know what it is that you're trying to accomplish, if you don't know where it is that people that you're dealing with come from, it's hard to tweak it so that it can be a successful curriculum. And so we determined that we wanted to reflect the voices of the people that we run into across the country.

Robyn Cenizal:

Excellent point. So you heard it here folks, Rosario says tweakers beware. So you make an interesting point about all of this and the importance of being culturally competent and who is doing the tweaking on this material. Those are excellent points. And I think that leads us to our next point. I want to talk to Kenny just a little bit. At the Resource Center

we promote the integration of relationship education skills into service delivery systems as part of a strategy to serve families more holistically. And the Fatherhood Clearinghouse is doing a really interesting project, an interesting strategy for integrating positive messaging into communities. They are doing so through barbershops. So Kenny tell us a little about the Fatherhood Buzz, and why barbershops?

Kenneth Braswell:

On the tail end of what both Nisa and Rosario were just talking about, there's an addition to cultural competency, and that's cultural reality. Historically in the Black community for as long as there's been clippers and guys have wanted to get their hair, you know, tight before they went to the club on Friday night, you know, there's barbershops for particularly men historically has always been a place of safe comfort to talk about their issues, to share their concerns, to release their frustrations.

And part of the Fatherhood Buzz effort for us was to begin to move into this comfortable space with them, not to intrude that space. And so what we wanted to do was as a Clearinghouse, we wanted to go into barbershops and change the source of information. We didn't want to change the context of the conversation, because you're not going to—we laugh about this all the time, they talk about child support in the barbershops. The question is what are they saying about it? [True.] So what we wanted to do is we wanted to be able to go into barbershops through Fatherhood Buzz to be able to give these barbers great information so that they can give their clients great information. So that they can have great outcomes and improve their relationships.

We send materials with tips on there, just in terms of helping barbers stimulate and change the course of their conversation. So they don't have to be all articulate about the conversation, they don't have to be a doctor in the conversation, but at least we want them to start from a safe frame, from a nice foundation. And so even if they have some issues, that they're going to talk about the issues, let's at least start where there's some good information and then move forward.

Charisse Johnson:

Can I go back to the tweaker? The reason why that's so important to me is because sometimes we don't recognize how some of the images in our mind as practitioners impact how we deliver services to our consumer. And sometimes I think some people may call it like structural racism, where norms and beliefs are a part of our organization and that it impacts how we make decisions. So even with, when you talk about how you develop curricula to really address the real issues and the conversations that we learn from our grantees about what really goes on in communities to dispel myths and to let people know that you need to touch that person where they are and not make all these assumptions, and how even if you're Black you may have some stereotypical assumptions and beliefs about Blacks and what they look like.

Voiceover:

The Panel discussed the topic of highlighting marriage in the African American community, including Black Marriage Day, starting with Nisa Muhammad and Charisse Johnson.

Nisa Muhammad:

There is this thing called Black Marriage Day. I got tired of hearing all of the negative things about Black people and their marriages. Low marriage rates, they don't want to get married, high divorce rates, high out of wedlock childbirth rates. Just this whole litany of negativity. There needs to be an opportunity where we can stop the negativity and start up something very positive and celebrate marriages in the Black community. Because believe it or not, there are a lot of them out there that are incredible, they are very positive, they have endured hell and high water and they're still maintaining. But they get no attention. You don't see them in the media. So we need to celebrate them.

Essence Magazine did the first little article about Black Marriage Day in November 2002. Well it's just been going strong ever since then, because people really want to celebrate what is happening in the Black community. This past year we were in over 300 communities and I say that communities as opposed to cities because some large cities have one, two, three, and four different celebrations. So there's all around the country, people are very eager to do it. They have incredible celebrations. So it's a cultural movement to help normalize marriage in the Black community. To let people know it happens, there's some fabulous couples that are married, and they're doing wonderful. So we're very encouraged about Black Marriage Day.

Charisse Johnson:

Thank you. I think we just heard one. Because I think we are now recognizing that it's not just top down or sideways in, it's all along that spectrum or even a continuum of everyone has a role that they must play in making families stronger. And everyone has a role that they can play to make Black families stronger. So even participating in, you know, Black Marriage Day, or whatever it may be, it's one approach to get the community thinking.

Another success is their partnerships. So you have partners in the community that can do marriage education, or whatever it may be.

Voiceover:

Kenneth Braswell spoke to the topic of marriage being out of reach, and righting the 'ship.

Kenneth Braswell:

About a year and a half ago we were funded, Fathers Incorporated, was funded by the Open Society Foundation to revisit the Monahan report. The 1965 report that talked about the case for Negro action and Black families in this country. One of the people that I interviewing was Dr. Timothy Smeeding at the University of Madison Wisconsin. And he said something to me that day that just struck me that day and continues to strike me, and it's right in line with that question as to why people believe or think that marriage is out of reach. And he says "Why do we have such a high threshold for marriage, yet such a low threshold for having children?"

That somehow we buy into the fact that it is so much more easier to have children than it is to get married. And oftentimes we take this conversation of marriage and we disconnect it from the conversation of children, when marriage and relationship is directly connected and critical to the success of our children. So whenever people ask that question, why is marriage so difficult and its out of reach, you should start asking yourself some other questions, which is really what are you trying to accomplish in life? And what path are you trying to take to accomplish that? And what have been your lessons? What have been your pathways to which you've seen that leads you to believe that the threshold of marriage is so high that it's unobtainable for you? And I believe that it all kind of goes back to what are the natures of your relationships? And I think that when you begin to ask those questions, I think that what we find in our communities often time, that we end up finding ourselves as parents as a result of situation-ships, not relationships. Situation-ships is when we become parents as a result of a situation that we happen to be in.

Voiceover:

Having culturally appropriate research and resources was a continued theme among the Expert Panel. Nisa Muhammad explained:

Nisa Muhammad:

I think that's part of the value of what the Resource Center has to offer: research about Black people by Black people. So that you can feel comfortable when reading the research that Tera knows what she's talking about. You don't have to wonder is she in some ivory tower somewhere writing this research about African American or Black couples and she's never been one, or seen one, or talked to any. That in fact she knows what she's talking about. I think that's part of the value of, as I said, the Resource Center and all of this research and the Toolkit for those of you who are interested in doing work with Black couples in the African American community, the resources are here to help you be very successful in that realm.

Voiceover:

Thanks for joining us today, we hope you enjoyed today's presented broadcast. To find more on this topic, a recording of the Expert Panel, the free resources discussed, and more information on healthy marriage and relationship skills, visit the National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families at www.HealthyMarriageAndFamilies.Org.

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