



Harmonic Connections PLUS LEGACY INSTITUTE

"An educated individual is an empowered individual."

P.I.E.S. in Black Couple Partnerships

African American couples that have satisfying and fulfilling relationships, with longevity, practice more non-traditional gender roles than traditional gender roles. The resiliency of the family spirit shows the uniqueness of gender roles among African Americans, yet historians agree that the historical context of African Americans cannot be compared with the majority culture.

During centuries of legal enslavement, U.S. laws did not allow marriage between African Americans, still African American men and women recognized their own partnerships as they worked alongside one another in manual labor.

Let's consider how the P.I.E.S. Dimensions of Romantic Partnerships may look different for people of African descent who have had different experiences, exposure, expertise, and education in different environments within the United States.

POWER

In contrast to those in the majority culture, African Americans have more often practiced shared leadership as a standard where joint decision-making, dual incomes, and shared domestic responsibilities were and continue to be stabilizers in romantic partnerships.

Many social scientists have interpreted African American couples' tendencies toward shared power as weakness in Black men and deviance away from standard American family values. Some researchers

say that households with dominant African American women was the cause for a reversal in male leadership in African American communities. However, there was no evidence of prevalent patterns of wife dominance among African American couples that have been studied. On the contrary, Black males were not positioned as military style leaders in the relationships and Black women had more independent roles, making them less dependent on men for dominance in leadership and financial protection.

IDEALS

Historically, traditional gender roles are less likely to characterize people of African descent in the U.S. and were not universally transferable to Black couples of diverse backgrounds.

Even as the majority culture in society moves away from traditional expectations for men and women, African American men still express desires to fulfill traditional “manhood roles” of being the breadwinner and sole provider in their homes. Likewise, some African American women express a desire to be able to focus their attentions solely in their homes.

African Americans’ ability to thrive outside of traditional roles is a strength rather than a weakness, especially as the majority culture continually seeks to break free from gender role expectations in the 21st century.

Throughout the history of African Americans and other ethnic groups in the United States, integration and assimilation into the majority culture has meant adopting styles and adapting to behaviors that may not suit every culture well. Traditional gender roles in relationships is an example of a failed attempt to assimilate to a behavior that was not suited for most African Americans in the United States.

There was an expectation that manhood be exemplified by a man’s ability to provide for his family, yet unjust laws prevented that from happening. Discriminatory practices continue to impact many African Americans and affect how they are able to enjoy *life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness* in the U.S. as it has been encouraged for others.

The redefining of gender role expectations (so that they do not limit the women in their life roles, goals and pursuits) is considered revolutionary right now in many countries. Yet there is much evidence that African American women have not been held to the same expectations as women in the majority culture.

From the earliest accounts of Black women working alongside Black men during slavery... to their continued roles as house servants and maids... to their educational pursuits in Historically Black Colleges and Universities at the turn of the 20th century... until today when the Black women have the more earned college degrees than any other demographic and have opened more businesses than any other group in the U.S.

Even before the movements, African American women's roles in society have helped redefine and broaden concepts of womanhood and contributed to the perception of the strength of women in the United States. Race has intertwined with gender to create distinct differences in expected gender roles for African American women.

For African American couples who see the greatest relationship success, there is a commitment to partner well within their relationship. Less emphasis is placed on committing to gender roles standards that do not fit their partnership dynamics. They have found success despite societal challenges as they committed to partner in unique ways that work toward their highest good.

ECONOMIC

Currently, women comprise about 50% of the United States' workforce, which has caused men's involvement in the household to increase. Furthermore, the number of women in the United States who earn higher salaries than men continues to increase. While traditional gender roles are based on men earning more in their homes, in 2008, 51.5% African American women made more than men—more than any other race. In the 21st century, Black men are still paid less than both white men and white women.

Among African Americans, however, these household dynamics are not new. Black women have historically achieved higher education levels and earned higher salaries than most Black men. Currently, twice as many Black women successfully complete bachelor degrees than Black men. Without advanced educational and vocational training, African American men continue to be challenged to earn enough money to be the sole provider of their homes.

Negative beliefs about African Americans are fueled by inadequate comparisons made to those in the majority culture. These beliefs do not take into account centuries of discriminatory laws that specifically led to unjust practices towards African Americans and families related to mass incarceration, employment, education, healthcare, housing, etc.

In the 19th century after the abolition of slavery when educational opportunities became available through Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Black families

often chose to educate their daughters while they sent their sons to do manual labor. This decision was often made to prevent Black women from experiencing sexual abuse as domestic servants that was prevalent in households within the majority culture.

Educational attainment was especially important prior to the Civil Rights Act when labor inequality caused almost half of African American women to seek employment in private household service jobs for low and undocumented wages. And African American women, unlike women in the majority culture, have historically been expected to work outside of the home and contribute to the family finances, even when married with children.

Underemployment and low wages have continually been a challenge to African American men. The expectation that men be the economic leaders and independent providers in their homes has seldom been met. However, historically, successful African American relationships have not been based on whether the man earned more money than the woman.

Not only have African American women worked to support their households with men, they have often earned more than African American men and gained employment, educational and economic opportunities because they represented a double minority—through sex and race.

SOCIAL

Traditional American expectations were that men had public responsibilities outside home, while women had domestic responsibilities for the home and children. Traditional romantic partnership roles placed men as the breadwinners and leaders of their homes and women as caregivers of children and keepers of the home.

Black men and women forfeited conventional patriarchal domestic structures to balance the limitations of economic opportunities.

One social dynamic that has been characteristic of many African Americans is their ability to function in non-traditional gender roles. Among African Americans, however, it has been common for both men and women to function both outside both inside home. In African American families, despite traditional gender beliefs, children's

assigned household chores are often gender neutral, which influences perceptions of gender roles.

In efforts to eliminate negative social impressions people had about African American family structures, some African American women sought to withdraw from the labor market and adopt a more traditional family structure.

In fact, Black women often see traditional gender roles of women as a **privilege** rather than an oppressive state, just as for many African American men, *man as the provider* is a **luxury** and not the norm. However, limited employment opportunities and low wages for Black men have often made it necessary for African American women to continue to work and help support their families.

***Power Couple Mentoring** was developed to provide additional information and objective educational tools that couples can use to effectively structure their unique household situations.*