INTERRACIAL MARRIAGE SYMPOSIUM: Responses to Bank’s Marriage Proposal

Prepared for the Council on Contemporary Families

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Executive Summary

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Because Banks’ work is already stirring controversy, CCF has invited leading authorities on marriage, sexuality, and family life to offer commentary on his proposals.

Background

Rates of marriage in the United State have declined substantially in the past 50 years, but the decline has occurred at different speeds, with differing causes and consequences in different groups. Up through the mid-20th century, the marriage rates of blacks and whites were approximately equal. During the past half century, however, African Americans have become the least married people in our nation, and many scholars argue that this rapid decline has affected the quality of personal relationships in the African-American community, especially for women. Among those scholars is Professor Banks.

What marriage decline means for black women. Banks observes that women in the African-American community are exceptionally likely to go without an intimate relationship for long periods, to enter conflict-ridden partnerships, and/or to see their relationships dissolve. Even college-educated black women, who have the best prospects for marriage of all black women, are only half as likely to marry as their white counterparts. And when they do marry, black women are more likely to marry men with substantially less education or less income.

Banks emphasizes the extent to which high rates of incarceration and job-market discrimination against black men contribute to this imbalance. But he also argues that the long-term social, economic, and political disadvantages black men have experienced in the culture at large have ironically given them a short-run advantage in their relations with black women, by creating a scarcity of marriageable men at all income and educational levels. He then focuses on the reactions of black women to this scarcity and suggests a controversial strategy to remedy the imbalance.

Banks’ proposal: the interracial dating market

Banks, himself a black man, issues a provocative challenge to black women: "Stop settling for less than you want or deserve and look to the interracial dating market. Don’t believe the doom-and-gloom claims that men of other races don’t want to date or marry black
women.” In fact, he claims, despite the racism of some white men, there are two or three times more nonblack men interested in dating black women than there are black women in the population. Banks shows how the reluctance of white men to date black women has been exaggerated, and notes that Latino, Middle Eastern, Indian and Native American men show even higher interest in dating Black women. Banks’ conclusion: Black women would benefit by marrying out more and marrying down less.

Bolstering black marriage
Banks is not giving up on black marriage. He argues that when black women form relationships with men of other races, this bolsters marriage within the black community. A racially integrated relationship market, he suggests, can help counter the disproportionate relationship power that black men wield as a result of their (socially imposed) scarcity. If more black women married non-black men, then more black men and women would marry each other. Link here to read Banks’ full discussion paper.

Researchers’ Responses
CCF has collected responses from prominent scholars of race, marriage, sexuality, and social policy. Their commentaries are previewed here; full texts and contact information and can be found here.

Sociologist Micere Keels (University of Chicago) offers evidence that black women are not the ones rejecting interracial matches. She also argues: "telling black women to 'marry out' rather than 'marry down' ignores the fact that women of all racial and ethnic groups are outpacing their male counterparts in educational attainment. The only viable solution for black women’s low likelihood of marriage is to correct society’s failure to educate all our boys". Sociologist Shirley Hill (Kansas University) adds that Banks "puts a lot of responsibility on women, implying that African-American parents (mostly mothers) are not properly socializing their sons and that women in the broader community (e.g., girlfriends) must take up the task." Belinda Tucker (UCLA) reports on her own survey data on marriage preferences and practices, suggesting that black women’s experience with white men’s sexual and beauty attitudes explains their mistrust of interracial marriage: "changing preferences and perceptions is no simple matter. It just might be easier to address the circumstances that have created and maintained the shortage of economically viable Black men." But sex researcher Pepper Schwartz (University of Washington) thinks that beauty standards are changing in ways that benefit black women. Other responses address the strong points of black husbands, trends in interracial dating, the challenges of raising biracial children, and the how interracial lesbian couples differ from heterosexual ones."
Why Interracial Marriage Is Good for Black Women - and the Best Hope for Restoring Marriage in the Black Community

_A discussion Paper prepared for the Council on Contemporary Families_

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More than 2 out of every 3 black women are currently unmarried, as are a majority of black men, and black women are 3 times as likely as white women never to marry.

College educated black women are twice as likely as their white peers never to marry, and a majority of college-educated black wives have less educated husbands.

These figures are often blamed on the shortage of stable and employed men in low-income communities, and there's considerable truth in that explanation. But racial gaps in marriage span the socioeconomic spectrum. At every income level black men are less likely than white men to be married.

Indeed, by some measures, the racial gap is actually wider among affluent men than among their economically disadvantaged counterparts. In most racial-ethnic groups, increases in income consistently translate into a greater likelihood of marriage. But the most affluent black men - those who earn more than $100,000 a year -- are actually less likely to marry than their lower earning but economically stable counterparts, men who earn, say, $50,000 or $60,000 a year.

One way to understand these features of the contemporary African-American relationship scene is the gender imbalance at all income and educational levels. In lower-income groups, black men have fallen behind their female counterparts, victims of a criminal justice system that incarcerates them en masse, an educational system that fails them, and a labor market that offers few lawful economic opportunities for poorly educated men. At any given time, more than 1 in 10 black men in their twenties and early thirties - prime marrying ages - is incarcerated.

But there is also a shortage of potential partners for middle-income and high-income black women. Many of the union jobs and other work that once allowed male high school graduates to earn middle-income wages have vanished, even as jobs that traditionally employ females have expanded. Only half as many black men as women complete college. The ranks of eligible black men are depleted further still by intermarriage: black men are 2
to 3 times as likely as black women to marry someone of another race, and economically successful black men are the most likely to do so.

While many black women don’t marry because they have too few options, some black men don’t marry because they have too many. In the relationship market, scarcity equals power: The better one’s options outside the relationship, the more leverage one can exert within it. A desirable black man who ends an unsatisfying relationship will find many other women waiting. That’s not true for black women, especially those who limit their relationships to black men.

When black women do marry, they are likely to marry men with less education or earnings than themselves. Half of all college-educated black wives have a husband with less education - often significantly less. In a world where successful marriages increasingly depend on shared interests rather than separate spheres, this incompatibility contributes to lower rates of marital satisfaction and higher rates of divorce in the black community. Some black men use their scarcity advantage, as men in other racial-ethnic groups and cultures have also done in similar situations, to maintain relationships that are sexually intimate but not monogamous. Research suggests that black men are more likely than any other group of American men to maintain relationships with multiple women. The end result is above-average rates of discord and distrust between black men and women.

Certainly, not all black men take advantage of the numbers imbalance. But when her partner’s behavior is less than satisfactory, a black woman, recognizing that she is on the wrong side of a numbers imbalance, may feel she has few options and hence little power to demand a different arrangement.

The most common response to the waning of black marriage has been to redouble the pressure on black women to uplift the community by bonding with their brothers in need. Black women have been urged -- by marriage activists, advice magazines, and often by their friends and families -- to "save" black men. Interracial marriage has been cast as a form of abandonment or betrayal. Better to remain single or put up with a partner's bad behavior, the thinking goes, than to "betray the race."

Black women are further discouraged from looking elsewhere by the widespread belief that they have few options for forming relationships with men who are not black. Much has been made, for example, of an OkCupid website study finding that black women send the most messages and receive the fewest replies of any group, and that white men write back to black women 25 percent less frequently than they should based on the compatibility scores the website calculates.

But fixating on that finding underestimates black women’s prospects in an integrated relationship market. In that same OkCupid study, Latino, Middle Eastern, Indian and Native American men all responded to black women at rates substantially higher than did white men. In fact, some of these groups of men responded to black women at higher rates than did black men!
The scarcity factor works in black women’s favor when they look beyond their own race. Black women constitute only 13 percent of the total female population, while non-black men are roughly 87 percent of the male population. Even taking into account that some white men may not want to date black women, there are more white men who are willing to form a relationship with a black woman than there are black women available to date. When we include other racial-ethnic groups, the odds get even better. There are certainly three or more times as many non-black men willing to date black women as there are black women.

In interviewing black women for my forthcoming book, I discovered many reasons that black women hesitate to cross the race line in their search for love. Many feel an understandable loyalty to their male counterparts, because they know all too well that racist indignities and injustices persist of the racist legacy in America. Some fear rejection by their partner’s family or their own. Some assume that men of a different race, white men in particular, won’t know anything about black women, black culture, or black history, and will lack the ability or desire to learn. Others worry that as a result of racist stereotypes, some non-black men will view a black woman as a fetish object or an exotic adventure, someone to experience but not to love.

And some black women remain within the race because they want their children to identify as black and fear that if they are biracial, they won’t. They don’t want children whose complexion is so light that their black mother may be mistaken for the nanny.

These and other explanations given by the women I interviewed are all very understandable. Yet as interracial marriage becomes ever more accepted, black women willing to enter the integrated romantic marketplace will find considerable benefits. Some research suggests that black women who marry outside the race are less likely to divorce than those who marry within it. One reason for this is that, in general, college-educated black women may have more in common with their white, Asian, or Latino classmates and co-workers than with a black guy they grew up with who never went on to higher education. By marrying out, black women avoid the need to marry down.

If significant numbers of black women embark on interracial relationships, this will help counteract the power imbalance that diminishes the marriage rate and corrodes relationships in the black community. The more black women expand their relationship options, the less power black men will wield, and the greater ability black women will have to create the kind of relationship they desire. It is difficult to resist this paradoxical conclusion: If more black women married non-black men, then more black men and women would marry each other.
Responses to Bank’s Marriage Proposal

Micere Keels (University of Chicago) does not think that Black women have been ruling out non-Black partners

"Dr. Banks correctly identifies the structural issue—there are significantly more marriageable black women than black men. But educated black women do not summarily reject suitors of other races. For a forthcoming book, I asked 200 college-going and college-educated black women, ages 18 to 51, what race/ethnicity of man they would like to marry and why. Although many stated a preference for a same-race spouse, this was usually a way of assessing probable compatibility. Once other measures of compatibility were evaluated, race greatly receded in importance.

"And black women are not the ones enforcing race-based matching in the world of online dating. Black women are more likely to include white men as possible dating matches than white men are to include them. Additionally, they receive the fewest online advances from men of other racial groups, and the most non-responses when they make online advances to men of other racial groups.

"Furthermore, telling black women to "marry out" rather than "marry down" ignores the fact that women of all racial and ethnic groups are outpacing their male counterpoints in educational attainment. The only viable solution for black women’s low likelihood of marriage is to correct society’s failure to educate all our boys."

From: Micere Keels, Assistant Professor, Department of Comparative Human Development, University of Chicago, and author of (forthcoming 2012) Societal Explanations for Personal Problems: The Decline in Marriage in America, and the Particular Case of College-Educated Black Women’s Low Likelihood of Marriage, 847-409-2757, micere@uchicago.edu.

Belinda Tucker (UCLA) agrees Black women are way of white men, but ties this to a history of white men’s attitudes towards them

"Our data from 21 large U.S. cities in 1996 showed that while nearly 90 percent of Black men would marry someone of another race, 71 percent of Black women also supported interracial marriage. When it came down to specifics, though, a differential reluctance emerged: only 57 percent of black women would marry someone who was white.*

"This reluctance to marry white men comes from a deep knowledge of this society’s historical and current views about Black women, especially in regard to those elements of self that are most vulnerable in romantic encounters—physical features and sexuality. Societal physical standards essentially the opposite of those possessed by most African American women are made abundantly clear in the skin color, hair texture, hip size, etc. glamorized in television programs, ads, and magazines. Media portrayals of Black women as either hypersexualized or Big Mommas continue to encourage exploitative attitudes. When I was in high school in the 1960s, one of my white male classmates casually quoted his father’s assertion: 'you cannot be a man until you split a black oak.' That quote has
remained embedded in my consciousness, and I’m certain it has affected my assessments of the motivations of white men who pursue African American women.

"Though Professor Banks may believe the continued loyalty expressed by African American women for African American men is misplaced, the enduring embrace of African American men establishes a boundary that is, at the very least, safe from societal rejections of Black womanhood (i.e., where standards of attractiveness and status are at least partially community defined). For, despite the near universal acceptance among Black men of interracial marriage, most married African American men have Black wives."


From: M. Belinda Tucker, Vice Provost, Institute of American Cultures and Professor of Psychiatry & Biobehavioral Sciences Center for Culture and Health, University of California, Los Angeles, (310) 794-3669, mbtucker@ucla.edu

But Pepper Schwartz (University of Washington) agrees with Banks that cultural prejudices against black women's looks are indeed changing
"Cultural and sociological studies show that for the most part, beauty is a cultural artifact. Samoan cultures have prized big women; other cultures have fetishized small feet or the nape of a woman's neck. Our own culture has bounced back and forth from revering lush, full hipped women, to no breasts or hips at all, to athletic bodies, etc. This happens with race as well. While evolutionary psychologists cite recurring preferences for facial symmetry and waist to shoulder ratio, they do not show universal preferences for racial type. When America was fighting the Japanese, Asians were taunted as 'slant eyes'; now Asian women are highly prized as models or movie stars. In America, light skin has long been a symbol of cultural privilege. Yet today men like Michael Jordon and women like Beyoncé are seen as sex symbols, and I believe that positive perceptions of African American women's beauty are on the rise."

From: Pepper Schwartz, Professor of Sociology, University of Washington, couples@u.washington.edu

Shirley Hill (Kansas University) says Banks' proposal has merit but "puts a lot of responsibility on women"
"Professor Banks' proposal that African American women confront the shortage of marriageable black men by becoming more open to interracial relationships has some appeal: It stands to broaden options for forming intimate partnerships and complicate racial categories for generations of children to come. The formula is simple: The bad behavior of African-American men (in this case, their evasion of marriage and fidelity) can be tamed if black women reverse the scarcity advantage. It puts a lot of responsibility on women, however, implying that African-American parents (mostly mothers) are not properly socializing their sons and that women in the broader community (e.g., girlfriends) must take up the task. As Banks notes, high rates of marginal (or no) employment and incarceration, coupled with low rates of educational attainment, explain many of the
patterns he describes. Dealing with those structural issues gets us closer to the root of the problem."

From: Shirley A. Hill, Professor of Sociology and Director of Graduate Studies, Kansas University 785-864-9420; hill@ku.edu

Scott Coltrane (University of Oregon) reminds us that in some ways gender equality is higher among married African-Americans
"The interaction between the gender numbers imbalance, the economic and educational disadvantages of men, and the dynamics of family life in African-American communities is complicated. True, black men and women often remain unmarried, and the marriages they do form are more fragile than those of whites. But in part because the gap between African American men's and women's wages has been smaller than for whites, marital relations between black couples have traditionally been more egalitarian than those of whites. Most national surveys show that black husbands take on a somewhat larger share of housework than white husbands. When studies control for income and education, married African American fathers are found to have similar levels of involvement with infants and similar styles of engagement with young children as white fathers. And nonresident black fathers are actually more likely than nonresident white fathers to see their children and interact with them frequently."

From: Scott Coltrane, Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences, University of Oregon, 541.346.3902l; casdean@uoregon.edu

Mignon Moore (UCLA) contrasts straight versus lesbian interracial partnering
"Non-Black lesbians are more likely than non-Black men to partner with Black women. This suggests that relative to heterosexual men, non-Black women who partner with Black women may place a greater value on the attributes Black women have to offer. The state of California, with the second largest population of Blacks in same-sex couple relationships (second only to New York), illustrates the differences between heterosexuals and same-sex couples in choosing partners: About 51 percent of Blacks in same-sex couples in California are in interracial relationships, compared to just 20 percent of Blacks in heterosexually married households.

"Black women in same-sex couples also tend to have higher incomes and are more likely than their married, heterosexual counterparts to have a college degree. This suggests that educated Black lesbians are better able to find a Black partner who is their equal in education and income. But when Black lesbians do partner with Black women with lower education and/or income, there is less stigma attached to the human capital inequalities in that union, because only heterosexual men expect to have higher status than their partners - that expectation does not strongly exist in relationships between women. Without the gender structure of male privilege, Black same-sex couples have more freedom to create relationships that are more egalitarian."

From: Mignon R. Moore, Chair, Race Gender and Class Section of the American Sociological Association; Associate Professor of Sociology, UCLA; author, Invisible Families: Gay
Identities, Relationships and Motherhood among Black Women. Need phone; moore@soc.ucla.edu

**Jenifer Bratter (Rice University) discusses the opportunities and the challenges of raising multiracial children**

"Interracial couples and families stand as one of the most potent symbols of a society healing its racial divide. But raising a multiracial child can be a daunting task, from negotiating child rearing strategies between parents of two distinctive cultural backgrounds to managing the process of racial identity development. Physical appearance often does not solely determine identity. Instead, my research shows interactions between parents, children, and the community in which they live also shape how children understand their own race. Biracial children often face racial difficulties from both sides of the racial spectrum, leaving parents to help their children to make sense of these experiences. This is doubly challenging for white parents, who may be confronting issues of racism for the first time.

"Although biracial children often inhabit diverse neighborhoods, many feel that they must 'choose' one race while leaving one parent out. Nevertheless, my research shows that biracial children seldom fully abandon their Black heritage. The large majority are classified on the Census with a black racial category, either alone or in combination with another race, with a small segment classified as white. Many children maintain this identity into adolescence and adulthood. As adults, my research shows that many biracial adults partner with Black adults and when classifying their own children, nearly all classify their children as solely Black. Therefore, while there are unique challenges rearing biracial children, simply instilling a Black racial identity is not one of them."

**From:** Jenifer L. Bratter, Associate Professor of Sociology, Rice University, Program Director for Race Scholars at Rice, 713-348-4254, jbratter@rice.edu.

**Virginia Rutter (Framingham State University) reminds us that interracial dating is increasing...but not with ease**

"Interracial unions, including interracial dating, have increased in the past fifty years in the United States. But the rates of increase are slow. 'How Color Blind is Love? Interracial Dating Facts and Puzzles,' a fact sheet for the Council on Contemporary Families that I co-authored this spring, reported that lack of social support means that interracial daters are less likely to present themselves to others as a couple or be affectionate in public. There continues to be less support in daters' families and communities when they are a mixed-race couple. Not surprisingly, people in more racially integrated settings are more likely to interracially partner. And younger people are increasingly more positive about interracial dating."

**From:** Virginia Rutter, Associate Professor of Sociology, Framingham State University, 508-626-4863, vrutter@framingham.edu.
Ellis Cose (author) responds that it may not be the numbers so much as finding a compatible mate

"Banks argues that black women could do everyone a world of good by shedding their reluctance to marry outside the race. But in a 2003 Newsweek cover story, 'The Black Gender Gap,' I quoted numerous black women who were already looking beyond the pool of black men. 'I love brothers... But there is such a gap that I think I may not end up with a black man,' said choreographer Fatima Robinson. 'If you have to have the same race, your choices are limited,' said civil-rights attorney Connie Rice.

"If we were just talking numbers, we might encourage black women to head to China, where millions of single men cannot find women. (Last year the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences estimated that more than 24 million Chinese men could be spouseless in 2020—a consequence of families aborting so many girls.)

"But simply pointing out that men are available in a theoretical pool is not the same as matching them up with compatible women—even in an age where computerized dating promises virtually limitless custom-ordered possibilities. The problem, I suspect, is not that black women are unwilling to consider marrying non-blacks. It is that someone special is not necessarily easy to find—whatever his race may be. Black women may be less in need of encouragement to broaden their horizons than of a workable strategy to find desirable mates. If Banks has a formula for that, black women will not be the only group beating a path to his door."

From: Ellis Cose, author of The End of Anger: A New Generation's Take on Race and Rage, Ellis.cose1@gmail.com
About CCF

The Council on Contemporary Families is a non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to providing the press and public with the latest research and best-practice findings about American families. Our members include demographers, economists, family therapists, historians, political scientists, psychologists, social workers, sociologists, as well as other family social scientists and practitioners.

Founded in 1996 and now based in the School of Education and Human Development at the University of Miami, the Council’s mission is to enhance the national understanding of how and why contemporary families are changing, what needs and challenges they face, and how these needs can best be met. To fulfill that mission, the Council holds annual conferences, open to the public, and issues periodic briefing papers and fact sheets.

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