



PROJECT MUSE®

---

Editor's Note: Black Families—A Personal Journey from  
*What's Happening!* to *Empire*

Journal of Black Sexuality and Relationships, Volume 1, Number 4,  
Spring 2015, pp. vii-xiv (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/bsr.2015.0012>



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/583112>

# Editor's Note

Black Families—A Personal Journey from *What's Happening!* to *Empire*

There is no one Negro community. There is no one Negro problem.  
There is no one solution.

—Robert Staples

As a child of the 70s, I remember being excited about watching the television show, *What's Happening!* (Monte, 1976). As a young, black boy in the Midwest, I thought that Roger, Dwayne, and Fred (Rerun) were the coolest characters because of the way that they managed the friendships that they had with one another as well as their collective ability to disentangle life's complications with the support of Dee (Roger's sister), Mabel (Roger's mother), and friend, Shirley (waitress). In my opinion, Roger was the nerdy intellect because he would try to logically solve the trio's issues; Dwayne was the shy "Yes, man" who could be easily swayed; and Rerun was the curious character who could entertain the others (and me) at any moment. Together, they helped me see the value of education, humility, and humor in life. In addition, the show enabled me to see how important it is to resolve conflict amicably in friendships and how resilient those relationships should be.

I was equally fascinated with the Evans clan of *Good Times* (Monte and Evans, 1974), who was the first family of Cabrini Green (famous housing project in Chicago). Every week, I longed to see the theatrics of James Jr. (J.J.) and how he negotiated his interests in his sibling relationships with Michael and Thelma. Even though he clowned and engaged in slapstick with the other characters, he always showed respect to his mother, Florida and father, James. At the time, I was too young to understand the value or implications of J.J.'s relationships but I knew that he tried desperately to be popular and accessible to potential romantic partners while in high school. Some of the socioeconomic challenges that the Evans family experienced

were similar to many of the struggles of black families in my hometown of Toledo, Ohio. Those challenges at the time included inconsistent employment or unemployment; barriers to education; crime; and families being unable to identify supportive community resources. The characters and storylines were fairly easy to grasp as many black families across the country were involved in comparable circumstances during the late 1970s. Moreover, from the show, it was the Evans' neighbor Wilona and adopted daughter, Penny who first introduced me to families who experience physical abuse and how it may be handled. The "take home" message for me from the show was that black families were courageous, strong, and flexible enough to accommodate difficult life circumstances to remain together.

In contrast to the socioeconomic struggles of the Evans family, there were *The Jeffersons* (Nicholl, Ross, and West 1975) and *Dif'rent Strokes* (Harris and Kuoff, 1978) in the same television era. George Jefferson, married to Louise, owned a chain of dry cleaning stores. Their businesses allowed them to have a full-time housekeeper named Florence. The show depicted the experiences of an affluent black couple who lived in a "deluxe apartment in the sky" and got involved in numerous complex situations with other family members (e.g., son Lionel and daughter-in-law, Jenny), neighbors (e.g., Tom and Helen), and community people (e.g., Mr. Bentley). Similarly on *a Dif'rent Strokes* (Harris and Kuoff, 1978), Arnold and Willis Jackson were two African American boys adopted by white millionaire Phillip Drummond and lived in New York City. The Jackson boys were adopted after their mother died. From these two shows of the late 70s and early 80s, I learned that black families come in many forms (e.g., interracial, adoptive) and that it is difficult for some families to communicate and navigate sensitive issues such as racism, sexism, sexual abuse, and illegal drug use. These value-laden topics were rarely, if ever, discussed in my home and it was assumed that my brother, Jared and I would always be respectful of one another and be sensitive to other people's life circumstances. I could not ever imagine my parents being okay with me using some of the racial epithets that George Jefferson used towards Tom and Helen Willis. I think my brother and I believed that that sort of language was exclusively for adults.

By the mid-eighties to early 90s, I enjoyed *The Cosby Show* (Lesson and Cosby, 1984) and *A Different World* (Cosby, 1987). Through high school and well into my undergraduate years at Hampton University, I don't remember a Thursday night that passed that I (or any of my friends) did not watch both of these shows because of how likable the cast members were. It was

mind blowing to watch a black doctor, Heathcliff, who was married to a black lawyer, Claire who reared five children. The spin-off television show, *A Different World*, portrayed Denise Huxtable (daughter of Heathcliff and Claire) attending Hillman College. From these two shows, I learned more about the benefits of education and the importance of historically black colleges and universities across the American landscape. In addition, it felt as if I grew up with the characters and had similar experiences around friendships, time management, dating relationships, and diversity.

I must confess that outside of professional wrestling and watching my Pittsburgh Steelers play, I did not watch much television for many years. School, family, and outside interests took precedence until a few years ago. After attending a meeting in Charlotte, North Carolina, I returned to my hotel room and happened to change television channels to pass the time. I stumbled upon a show that portrayed several black characters arguing about relationship commitment, familial role strain, unmet relational expectations, and fractured friendships. I was drawn to the cinematic dysfunction and toxicity. I remember my jaw dropping and feeling “moved” by the storylines of *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta* (Wolfgang and Sandberg, 2012). It was a marathon of episodes and I did not move from my chair for several hours because the storylines were so compelling. By this time in my professional life, I had completed my doctorate and postgraduate studies, was well into my private practice for a number of years, and had never experienced the depth and breadth of drama depicted on this show. Even as a marriage, family, and sexuality therapist I absolutely could not believe one episode where a psychologist hosted a couple’s session about infidelity with the offending partner, his primary partner, and a secondary partner. My eyes remained glued to the television as I watched in disbelief and horror as the trio quarreled and fought with one another. I cannot say that I learned anything from the show except how powerful scripted reality television can be in exposing materialism, sexism, concurrent relationships, betrayal, triangulation, enmeshment, and some of the socioemotional challenges of some black couples.

I just finished watching the final episode of the popular television show, *Empire* (Strong and Daniels, 2015), and I must acknowledge that I am truly exhausted. The show depicts a Black family involved in the music business and relational movement through incarceration, infidelity/betrayal, mental health issues, entitlement, homicide, friendships (functional and dysfunctional), recreational drug consumption/trafficking, concurrent in-

timate relationships, homophobia, and abrupt power shifts. I've had several colleagues ask me about my thoughts about this show and as I attempt to recap the story, I find myself taken aback as I recount the storylines and family dynamics.

There has been some criticism about *Empire's* depiction of Black stereotypes and how the characters negotiate friendships and relationships (Degans, 2015; Ryan, 2015; Callahan, 2015; Kenneally, 2015; Lowry, 2015; Jensen, 2015; Tabry, 2015). Like the aforementioned shows in this essay, what's compelling about all of these shows is their ability to stir emotions (positive and negative) around the struggle and triumph of some black families in our country. This emotion causes some of us to have contested discussions and heated debates in our schools, churches, barber/beauty shops, jobs, and kitchen tables. Whether it is the socioeconomic challenges and uncertainty and protectiveness of the Evans family in *Good Times*; the cultured and communicative Huxtables of *The Cosby Show*; or the feistiness and brash of the Lyons family in *Empire*, all of these fictional characters and storylines present an opportunity for us to reflect and talk about the elasticity, resilience, and diversity of our own families. *No family constellation is ever ideal or perfect because of the flawed individuals who make up all families.*

Perhaps the television shows that we watch may merely reflect a "snapshot" of the continuum of family functioning and may also be a "looking glass" into our own families. This may be one of the factors that compels us to tune in each week or download complete television series onto our electronic devices. If what we watch does not reflect our individual families, there exists the possibility that our compulsion to view these dramatic shows may be driven by our own internal anxiety (drama) and chaos. *What we watch on television may be a function of who we really are as individuals.* Whatever the motive may be for viewing television dramas and situational comedies, each show and character presents an opportunity for us to talk and learn.

When talking about popular film and television with my students, I sometimes ask the following questions to get them to think about how they would want to shape our television viewing culture:

If you had an opportunity to develop your own primetime television drama/comedy that had characters of your race/ethnicity, what kind of show would it be? What plots or storylines would you include and why?

Who would your lead character(s) be and by what criteria did you select this person/people?

After you've developed your show, what do you think would keep people interested in your project? In other words, how would your characters and storylines evolve over a viewing season (12 episodes)?

What might be some of the criticisms of your show and to what extent do the storylines reflect or divert from reality?

In your developed show that reflects your race/ethnicity, how might you address sensitive issues such as racism, sexism, homophobia, intimate partner violence, socioeconomic status (e.g., education and employment), colorism, ageism, and/or aesthetics?

This conversation about media influences and assumptions about persons of African descent will continue with the Black Families, Black Relationships, Black Sexuality Conference in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania this October, 2015. We have received a number of proposals that specifically address stereotypes and myths of our relationships as well as the transhistoric function/dysfunction of our families. What's powerful about the proposals submitted is that the researchers and clinicians have captured some of the behavioral, cognitive, and affective experiences of black folks as well as those who academically or clinically serve us. While the proposal deadline concluded this April, the Association of Black Sexologists and Clinicians will continue to welcome proposals until August 15, 2015. These proposals will be "wait listed" as we are trying our best to accommodate all submissions. There is a significant buzz in our community about the journal, organization, and conference, and we understand that we are still relatively new. Given that, it is very important for us to be as inclusive as possible and offer professionals an opportunity to come and share the work that they have done. We are humbled at how fast our family has grown and invite you to be a part of the many initiatives that we have going on. Please share this information with your colleagues and peers that we are, indeed, Building and Strengthening Our Community.

This fourth and final issue of the first volume for the JBSR contains articles that continue to address the diversity of black sexuality and relationships. Within the light of the previous conversation about the assumptions of race/ethnicity, Drs. Essie Hall and Karen Witherspoon of Chicago State University share their work, *How Adopting Stereotypical Roles May Impact Sexual Risk Behavior among African American College Women*, on the relationship between African American women's sexual risk behavior and their adop-

tion of stereotypic roles (e.g., Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire, Superwoman). The authors surveyed a sample of one hundred ten African American undergraduate women at a predominantly black and urban university and uncovered some interesting findings.

The second study, *Internalization of the Thin Ideal, Media Images and Body Image Dissatisfaction in African American College Women: Implications for Black Female Sexuality*, presented in this issue is written by Kena L. Watson and her colleagues of North Carolina Central University. Like the previous study, the researchers examined African American college women and the extent to which they internalize media images and its impact on one's body image. Using social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) as a guide to survey one hundred thirty-five women, results indicate that internalization influences the relationship between media imagery and body image. Their work is profound as it enables our community to have a better understanding about how some young women compare and cognitively process how satisfied/dissatisfied they are with their bodies.

Given the recent national attention on intimate partner violence, Maxine Davis of the George Warren Brown School of Social Work, gives additional resonance to the sensitive issue in her essay, *Theorizing Religious Abuse within the Context of Intimate Partner Violence: The African American Community*. What's fascinating about her insightful manuscript is that she recognizes that there needs to be greater discussion about how some abusers use religion to mistreat their partners. She presents a theoretical model that is specific to members of the African American community.

The next article in this issue, *The Intersection of Race and Gender: Teaching Reformed Gender Ideologies to Black Males in the Context of Hegemonic Masculinity* by Lauren Wesley, offers us an opportunity and invitation to reframe our understanding of the manner in which some black men experience masculinity and provides us with an alternative conceptualization aimed at individual and social empowerment. Moreover, she speaks about some of the socioeconomic challenges that some black men face and how they must begin to think differently about themselves and how they experience their communities.

Finally, Dr. Larry Icard of Temple University and his colleagues have completed some tremendous work in South Africa examining the sexual attitudes and behaviors of men who have sex with men (MSM). Their study, *Our Village Is Watching: Sociocultural And Attitudinal Factors Related To HIV Sexual*

*Risk Behaviors Among Black South African Men Who Have Sex With Men*, suggests that some men in this region will not openly share or discuss having same sex partners and/or decline to engage in safer sex behaviors. Using focus groups and demographic data, their work further illuminates the multifaceted experiences of sexual risk taking behaviors of South African MSM.

Thank you for your interest in the *Journal of Black Sexuality and Relationships* and please consider us for your scholarly submissions. My colleagues and I look forward to meeting you at the Black Families, Black Relationships, Black Sexuality Conference this October, 2015.

## REFERENCES

- Callahan, Y. (2015). Lee Daniels Responds to Tavis Smiley's Critique of *Empire*. *The Roots*. Retrieved April 21, 2015, from [http://www.theroot.com/blogs/the\\_grapevine/2015/04/lee\\_daniels\\_responds\\_to\\_tavis\\_smiley\\_s\\_critique\\_of\\_empire.html](http://www.theroot.com/blogs/the_grapevine/2015/04/lee_daniels_responds_to_tavis_smiley_s_critique_of_empire.html).
- Cosby, B. (1987, September 24). *A Different World*. NBC Broadcast television network, New York, N.Y., United States.
- Deggans, E. (2015). Does Fox's 'Empire' Break Or Bolster Black Stereotypes? *Monkey See Pop-Culture News and Analysis*. Retrieved April 21, 2015, from <http://www.npr.org/blogs/monkeysee/2015/03/18/393785570/does-foxs-empire-break-or-bolster-black-stereotypes>.
- Festinger, L. (1954). A theory of social comparison processes. *Human Relations*, 7(2), 117-140.
- Harris, J., & Kuoff, B. (1978, November 3). *Diff'rent Strokes*. NBC Broadcast television network, New York City, United States.
- Jensen, J. (2015). *Empire*. *Entertainment Weekly*. Retrieved April 21, 2015, from <http://www.ew.com/article/2015/01/07/empire>.
- Kenneally, T. (2015). 'Empire' Co-Creator Lee Daniels: Homophobia Is 'Killing African American Women'. *The Wrap: Covering Hollywood*. Retrieved April 21, 2015, from <http://www.thewrap.com/lee-daniels-homophobia-is-killing-african-american-women/>
- Lesson, M., & Cosby, B. (1984, September 20). *The Cosby Show*. NBC Broadcast television network, New York, NY, United States.
- Lowry, B. (2015). TV Review: 'Empire'. *Variety editions*. Retrieved April 21, 2015, from <http://variety.com/2015/tv/reviews/tv-review-empire-1201390765>.
- Monte, E. (1976, August 5). *What's Happening*. ABC Television, New York, United States.
- Monte, E., & Evans, M. (1974, February 8). *Good Times*. CBS Television City, Hollywood, CA., United States.
- Nicholl, D., Ross, M., & West, B. (1975, January 18). *The Jeffersons*. CBS Television City, Hollywood, CA., United States.
- Ryan, M. (2015). 'Empire' Review: A Muted Soap With One Fab Performance. *Huff Post Entertainment*. Retrieved 04 21, 2015, from [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/01/07/empire-review-tv\\_n\\_6429980.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/01/07/empire-review-tv_n_6429980.html).
- Staples, R. (1999). *The Black Family: Essays and Studies* (6th Edition). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Strong, D., & Daniels, L. (2015, January 7). *Empire*. Fox Network, Los Angeles, CA, United States.



- Tabrys, J. (2015). Here's What The Critics Are Saying About Fox's New Hip-Hop Drama 'Empire'. *UPROXX The Culture Of What's Buzzing*. Retrieved April 21, 2015, from <http://uproxx.com/tv/2015/01/heres-what-the-critics-are-saying-about-tonights-empire-series-premiere>.
- Wolfgang, D., & Sandberg, J. (2012, June 18). Love & Hip Hop: Atlanta. Video Hits One (VH1), New York City, NY, United States.