The Love Jones Cohort: Single and Living Alone (SALA) by Choice, Circumstance or Both? Is Marriage the Option?

LaToya Council, Kris Marsh

The Love Jones Cohort

Single and Living Alone (SALA) by Choice,
Circumstance or Both? Is Marriage the Option?

LATOYA COUNCIL AND KRIS MARSH

Abstract: This article centers on the Love Jones Cohort, revealing the ways in which Black women understand and navigate their single status. The term "Love Jones Cohort" originates from the movie *Love Jones* (1997) and incorporates the common demographic term "cohort", which refers to a band of people. Characters in *Love Jones* are young, educated, Black professionals, who have never been married, are child-free, and live alone or with unmarried non-romantic friends. Following this movies' character demographics, this study draws from a Black feminist and intersectional analytical framework; and engages singlehood scholarship and aspects of politics of respectability through semi–structured interviews with Black women in the Love Jones Cohort. The two overarching research questions include: how do Black American women in the Love Jones Cohort view their single and living alone (SALA) status (choice, circumstance, or both); and in what ways do these Black women navigate their SALA status? Two main implications arise from this study. First, Black women's membership in the Love Jones Cohort can be due to choices, circumstances, or in many cases a combination of the two. Thus, to make judgments of their status based solely on individual behavior and without looking to structural context is shortsighted. Second, although Black women in the Love Jones Cohort might face mental health and well-being challenges, they have developed a variety of strategies prioritizing their safety.

Introduction

While much has been written about both dating within the Black middle class (Clarke, 2011; Council, 2021; Hill, 2020) and the rise in singlehood (Kislev, 2019; Klinenberg, 2013; DePaulo, 2006) much less research has bridged these two concepts: Black middle class Americans—in particular—Black women who are single (never married) and living alone (SALA), and how their single status shapes their views on marriage, dating, and coping with singlehood (Dickson & Marsh, 2008; Marsh et al., 2007; Marsh *forthcoming*).[1] Accordingly, our research explores the extent to which: Black women who are SALA in the Black middle class understand and frame their SALA status by choice, circumstance, or both; and how they navigate their singlehood? What does their framing of singlehood say about the status as SALA within the Black middle-class?

This study examines these interconnected questions by drawing from Black feminism, Black feminist sociology, and intersectionality as collective analytical and conceptual frameworks that informs and undergirds the choices SALA Black middle-class women make regarding singlehood. In essence, this paper argues how multiple interlocking and oppressive social identities should be considered in tandem (Collins, 2015; Collins & Bilge, 2020; Crenshaw, 1990; Lunda & Pirtle, 2021; Nash, 2018); and how these identities, dovetailed with structural forces, leads to various Black middle class families and households including SALA Black women within the Love Jones Cohort.

To articulate how SALA Black middle-class women's singlehood is informed by interlocking systems of oppression, this study engages with the larger body of singlehood scholarship that in many ways overlooks how systemic inequalities, including gendered racism, shape singlehood among Black women. In 1990, while writing at the same time, sociologist Patricia Hill Collins wrote *Black Feminist Thought*, and legal scholar, Kimberlé Crenshaw pinned *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color*. Hill (1990) and Crenshaw (1991) assert that examining categories of "racism" and "sexism" separately, instead of interlocking, renders Black women invisible. Accordingly, much of the singlehood scholarship characterizes the increase in singlehood among women as them asserting personal empowerment against patriarchal structures (Kislev, 2019; Klinenberg, 2013; DePaulo, 2006). Although we agree with this perspective, we also understand that the choice to choose singlehood is different for women on the margins, and in this case, Black

middle-class women who are choosing singlehood often stemming from choice, circumstance, or the combination of the two.

This article argues that in a very similar way, the singlehood movement often leaves Black SALA households, more precisely Black SALA women, fighting for more visibility. A fight that should encompass how structural forces can shape their marriage options, dating patterns, and ultimately Black women being SALA. Conflating Black SALA women into the larger category of singlehood devoid of a nuanced and thoughtful discussion of how structural gendered racism—the totality of interconnectedness between structural racism and structural sexism in shaping race and gender inequities (Lunda & Pirtle, 2021)—shapes their dating and marriage prospects, essentially whitewashes the experiences of these Black women. Accordingly, we argue that continuing to superimpose a singlehood framework, steeped in whiteness and one that has a white gaze, on the experiences of Black SALA women discounts the important effects of institutional racism, sexism, gendered racism, and other systematic inequalities that SALA Black middle-class women face. This group of Black middle-class women are redefining singlehood that underscores the intersections of race, gender, and class through their incorporation of singlehood practices that underscore how their SALA status represent choices, circumstance, and sometimes the combination of the two.

SALA Black middle-class women's responses to singlehood also contends with the basic tenants of respectability politics. In its most basic form and definition and in relation to this study, respectability politics is the mis-guided idea that Black women should change to fit in or conform to mainstream (in this case white and/or heteronormative marriages and partnerships) ways, manners, behaviors, and appearances to assimilate better with whiteness and "respectable" Blackness. Respectability has played a salient role in how the Black middle class is depicted, especially as it relates to marital status (Higginbotham, 1993). Particularly, when respectability politics emerged within the Black community, Black women, conducting race uplift work in their churches and neighborhoods, often did so within a framework of married women and mothers (Higginbotham, 1993). Specifically, their race, gender, and sexuality, as heterosexual Black married women with children were used as an example of respectable Black womanhood that ultimately helped the Black race move forward despite white supremacy (Higginbotham, 1993). To be a respectable Black woman, often meant conforming to the normative "Black Lady" controlling image (Collins, 2009).

The idea of respectable Black women who are married holds today, and often frames the choices many Black middle-class women make regarding work and family life (Barnes, 2015).

As women who are constantly policed and subjected to the performative "lady-like" trope or to behave respectably (Collins, 2004; Cooper, 2018; Cooper, 2017), examining the viewpoint of SALA Black middle-class women provides an opening to explore the ways in which some Black women can and do reify and redefine respectability. When Black women in the Love Jones Cohort are displaying themselves on their terms, including being SALA by choice or through an agentic decision making process, some scholars suggest they are engaging in "disrespectability politics" (Cooper, 2018: Cooper, 2017).

In this paper, we draw from the above interrelated arguments and discussions by turning toward and centering the voices of those Black middle-class women who are SALA. First, this study explores how Black women in the Love Jones Cohort understand and frame their SALA status. Second, this research highlights how these same Black SALA women navigate their single status as members of the Love Jones Cohort.

A Note about The Love Jones Cohort Term

Media portrayals suggest that the Black middle class has a new face. Previously, the media prototype for the Black middle class, was exemplified by the Huxtable Family from *The Cosby Show* (1984–1992). However, in the 1990s, a surge of television sitcoms and films were produced depicting Black middle-class characters of a quite different demographic profile. These characters were twenty-something educated professionals who had never been married, were child-free, and lived alone or with an unmarried friend or two. In addition, films were produced depicting this new demographic profile, with one of those films including *Love Jones* (1997), which starred Larenz Tate as an up-and-coming poet and Nia Long as a talented but recently unemployed photographer. *Love Jones* follows the two lead characters, as well as their friends and acquaintances, as they pursue careers and romantic partnering. At its core *Love Jones* deals with relationship decisions, premarital sex, personality and physical characteristic preferences, gender income differentials, and the realization that growing old and never marrying might have health implications, and a strong possibility for many Black Americans. Accordingly, we define the Love Jones Cohort as members

of the Black middle class who are single and living alone (SALA). The terms SALA and the Love Jones Cohort are not interchangeable. Whereas SALA refers to household composition and can be attributed to Black households of any socioeconomic status or class group, the Love Jones Cohort directly relates to household type (SALA) and socioeconomic status (middle class). Explicitly, the Love Jones Cohort are those SALA in the Black middle class and Black women are the majority in this category (Marsh, *forthcoming*; Marsh et al, 2007).

Literature Review

Is Marriage Less Attractive for Black People?

Black marriage and family scholars provided potential theoretical frameworks and explanations for the decline in Black marriage and the rise in singlehood among Black women (Dickson & Marsh, 2008; Wilson, 1978, 2012). Research drew the conclusion that the marital shifts within the Black community mostly stem from economic and demographic changes, which has contributed to new social and cultural conditions. Economic explanations often suggest that the limited employment opportunities for Black men make them poor marriage prospects—also known as the "shortage of marriageable Black men" hypothesis (Darity Jr & Myers Jr, 1995; Wilson, 1978, 2012). Another often cited economic and demographic based explanation is the gendered "marriage squeeze," which refers to an available pool of both quantity and quality Black men for the number of heterosexual Black women within the same birth cohort (Tucker & Michell-Kernan, 1995).

The gendered "marriage squeeze" has contributed to a sex ratio imbalance among heterosexual Black women and men. The sex ratio imbalance has largely resulted in a lower number of Black men for Black women to marry. This circumstance coupled with anti–Black sentiments in social institutions, structural forces, systematic inequalities, institutional racism, gendered racism, and class stratification, might make marriage a less attractive desire, which can make room for singlehood to become a much more attractive choice for middle-class Black women.

In terms of shifting social and cultural conditions, some scholars have suggested that the benefits of marriage and the ability to maintain the institution may not be as great for Black married couples compared to other racial and ethnic groups (Broman, 1993, 2005; Cherlin, 1998; Dillaway & Broman, 2001). Although others have challenged this claim (Council,

2021; Marks et al., 2008; St. Vil et al., 2018), arguing that marriage perhaps serves as one safeguard for Black middle-class women who are often dealing with systemic racism and sexism—thereby becoming a both/and for Black middle-class women, a form of support while reproducing gender inequality. Regardless, many scholars have emphasized that it is important to look at Black marriage through the intersections of race, gender, class, age, culture, identity, and nativity (Johnson & Loscocco, 2015; Blackman et al., 2005; Bryant et al., 2008; Chaney, 2010; Chaney & Marsh, 2008; Clarke, 2011; Jenkins et al., 2020; LaPierre & Hill, 2013; Mouzon et al., 2020; St. Vil et al., 2018). Beyond this are the processes and structural forces undergirding the interlocking systems of oppression in the marriage market (Collins, 2009), which reproduce the inequalities of love (Clark, 2011) for SALA Black women. This is of critical importance for understanding Black middle-class women's experiences, because they, unlike poor Black women, are considered "class" privileged when it comes to marriage, with many still having the privilege to marry (Cohen & Pepin, 2018). But, as we see with SALA Black middle-class women, "class" privilege at the intersection of race and gender underscores racialized class experiences whereby a group of SALA Black middle-class women exist, and they are navigating singlehood by choice, circumstance, or the combination of the two.

Using Black Feminist Thought, Intersectionality, and Respectability Politics to Understand Choices about Dating, and Singlehood Among SALA Black Middle-Class Women

Collins (2004) points out that, in the spirit of respectability politics, Black women often submit to Black male dominance. This can result in unfulfilling and even toxic relationships in order to maintain an image of a good wife and mother (Collins, 2004; Landor & Barr, 2018), with Black women constantly admonished that we must be "respectable" (Collins, 2004; Cooper, 2018; Cooper, 2017; Cottom, 2018). Scholars drawing on an intersectional lens may theorize that Black women are faced with two competing "rational" choices (Clarke, 2011; Collins, 2004, 2009; Landor & Barr, 2018).

On the one hand, Black married women might submit to the oppressive nature of respectability politics by engaging in relationships and marriages. This means being fully aware that such relationships may be shaped by gender inequality, inequity, patriarchy, and gendered racism (Barnes, 2015).

On the other hand, Black never married women, such as the SALA and

middle-class Black women in this study, might challenge respectability politics by forgoing unfulfilling romantic relationships, making a rational and agentic decision—either by personal choice, structural circumstance, or an amalgamation of both—to carve out a SALA lifestyle that includes fulfilling and gratifying non-romantic relationships with friends and family members (Marsh, *forthcoming*), known as "strategic singlehood"—the intentional practice of enacting or maintaining one's single status for the purposes of growth, safety, or exploration" (Moorman, 2020). From this perspective, the SALA Black women in this study, who are members of the Love Jones Cohort, are perhaps challenging the politics of respectability as they maintain and embrace their SALA status.

Data and Methods

This article is based on a larger study for a book manuscript that is in production and forthcoming (Marsh, *forthcoming*). As part of the larger study, 62 interviews were conducted during the summer of 2015. Nine interviews with Black women in the Love Jones Cohort frame this study. Interviewees were targeted through professional and personal organizations, such as the National Black MBA (Master of Business Administration) Association, the National Coalition of 100 Black women, and Black Greek organizations. The assumption was that those associated with these organizations would have at least a bachelor's degree. The aspirational sample would consist of those identifying as Black (only), aged between 30 and 60, living either alone or with individuals they had no romantic connection with; never married; and self-identifying as middle class (Marsh, *forthcoming*; Marsh et al, 2007). Table 1 provides a cursory profile of the nine Black women in this study. The table includes their name, age, and a brief profile that highlights the hobbies and other related activities for each Black woman.

One of the authors on this paper, Kris Marsh, developed a Black Middle-Class Index (BMCi) to measure class status. (Marsh et al., 2007; Dickson & Marsh, 2008; Marsh & von Lockette, 2011). The BMCi index is based on having a professional occupation and a college or post-secondary graduate degree; with a household income at or above the median for Black households; and a homeowner (see Marsh et al., 2007 for additional details). Should all these criteria be met, an individual receives the highest possible score of four on the BMCi, which is necessary to be considered a part of the Love Jones Cohort.

Table 1: Nine Black Women Members of the Love Jones Cohort

Number	Name	Age	Profile
1	Nancy	43 *estimated*	Nancy has had many jobs since she was a teenager, from working at a summer camp to interning for the government, with her most recent occupation being a program manager. During her spare time, she enjoys gardening, writing for a local newspaper in the DC area, and traveling the world.
2	Carrie	38	Carrie is currently self-employed, working in media relations. She loves creative outlets like writing, photography, music, and art.
3	Madison	35	Madison currently works in the school system counseling students on their everyday academic and personal needs. She enjoys listening to music and attending concerts, shopping, and spending time with her loved ones.
4	Renita	52	Renita is a social worker who has spent her career helping underserved populations. She enjoys going on shopping sprees and occasionally watching mobster movies.
5	Adoriah	32	Adoriah is a primary grade schoolteacher and has taught in both Maryland and Washington D.C. She knew from a young age she was destined to work with children. She loves traveling, reading, shopping, 8and arts and crafts. Although engaged at the time of the interview, she identifies as single and living alone.
6	Alexandra	33	Alexandra works as an analyst in a major public-school system and previously worked as an assistant at an accounting firm. In her free time, she loves to write, read, and illustrate, with her favorite genre to write being young adult fiction.
7	Olivia	54	Olivia is an experienced attorney working for the government. In addition, she runs her own fashion business. Olivia loves to read, shop, listen to music, and travel to the Caribbean.
8	Ashley	29	Ashley is a program evaluator, assessing programs related to health. She holds a PhD with a background in public health. Her most recent and favorite hobby is doing arts and crafts.
9	London	40	London (40) likes watching nature shows on television in her free time. Professionally, she works on contracts for the federal government.

Potential interviewees were first contacted by via email, with the purpose of the study explained as being, "To examine the experiences and perceptions of those who are single and living alone and members of the Black middle class." This advertisement email script was sent to 163 individuals and 27 national organizations. Once interested individuals responded, a scheduler sent a follow-up email explaining our interest in interviewing single (never married) Black women and men aged 30–60. As a research team we settled on the 30–60 age range for the initial recruitment emails. In case we received inquiries outside this age range, we were willing to expand to a five-year range on the upper and lower limits for a revised range from 25 to 65. This flexibility allowed us to stay within the age range for the quantitative work done on this demographic group by author Marsh. Before interviews were conducted, all respondents consented to the study and were provided a copy of the consent form. Respondents were also compensated with $15 dollars in cash.

Semi–structured interviews were conducted in–person, either on campus at the University of Maryland, College Park, or in a location of respondents' choice. Interviews averaged approximately 60 minutes—though the exact time varied between interviewees—with follow-up probing questions asked. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed via a transcription service. The research team reviewed transcripts and conducted a second data cleaning of the interviews to make sure the transcriptions accurately reflected respondents' perspectives. Interviewees were constantly reassured that their identity and responses would remain confidential, and that their participation was voluntary. To protect interviewees' privacy and reassure them that their identities would not be revealed, pseudonyms were assigned. Where necessary, certain identifying markers are kept vague and/or ambiguous to ensure confidentiality. For example, the actual name of organizations where interviewees hold memberships are not provided. At the conclusion of the interview, interviewees were asked to voluntarily provide five names of friends, co-workers, associates, and/or family members who may be willing to participate in the study based on the research design's selection criteria. This technique is known as snowball sampling. This study has University of Maryland, institutional review board (IRB) approval, 547060–8.

Data Coding and Thematic Categories

The nine interviews were transcribed and analyzed using inductive and deductive reasoning, a methodological approach that allowed for the data

to be "double fitted" with emergent theory and literature. "Double-fitting" is a technique that uses empirical evidence to improve theoretical concepts, while simultaneously using the theoretical concepts to refine empirical findings. The qualitative data was analyzed through multiple iterations of the inductive and deductive coding process (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1997). Themes were identified from the narratives. First, the research team, including a dozen students, both graduates and undergraduates, identified themes, and developed concepts and propositions represented in the data. To minimize overlap, themes were defined, organized, added, collapsed, expanded, and redefined until an effective coding scheme was developed.

The next round of coding focused on taking the developed themes and superimposing them on the transcripts. To ensure reliability and validity within this thematic analysis—which again drew on methodological approaches in the second author's previous qualitative work (Dean et al., 2013). The research team conducted focused coding separately and then together to check and resolve any discrepancies with study codes. The research team developed a data matrix, like a spreadsheet or table, with each row reflecting a different Black woman and each column corresponding to a dimension of a larger theme (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Individual cells were populated with direct quotes. Additional columns were added to indicate whether a direct quote captured the dimension of the theme in question.

Study Limitations

All interviewees lived in Washington, D.C.'s metropolitan area, which includes parts of Virginia and Maryland (known as the DMV). Although 74 interviewees were initially interviewed for this study, 12 had to be excluded for various reasons, ranging from having previously been married, and/or having at least one child (meaning they did not fit the study's criteria). Second, although recruitment efforts were made, the sample includes only one respondent who openly identified as part of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Since this study relies on the perspective of nine SALA Black middle-class women within the Love Jones Cohort, this study cannot make broad generalizations. Notwithstanding this limitation, small sample sizes are still relevant and can illuminate more information regarding a social group's experience with social inequality in the dating and marriage market. From studies that can make broad generalizations, we know that Black women are

impacted by structural inequality as they understand their romantic partnering experiences within the United States. Accordingly, this group of nine SALA Black middle-class women provides more nuanced to this experience.

Results

In this section we unpack how SALA Black middle-class women go about understanding and framing their SALA status by choice, circumstance, or both; and how they navigate their singlehood. Several themes emerged from this group of respondents. First, their SALA choice is based on previous circumstance. Second, choosing SALA is driven by personal experience and/or aspirations. Third, as individuals with a status as SALA, women mentioned being concerned with their safety, and how being SALA framed the choices they made regarding housing, residential neighborhoods, and loneliness.

Choosing SALA Based on Previous Circumstances

Within the first theme, SALA Black middle-class women relied on previous dating experiences to affirm their choice to remain single. In previous experiences, this group of SALA Black middle-class women encountered heterosexual relationships with men they described as not being the right choice, and as men who were only looking to be involved with them romantically because of what they expect to get from the women. In this way, SALA Black middle-class women are commenting on the circumstance of the gendered "marriage squeeze," which often places Black women in a position whereby they have a hard time encountering Black men who can meet healthy romantic partnering expectations (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995).

Nancy was adamant that staying single was a choice because of previous circumstances, which included encounters with men who "had some rough years."

> It is hard to explain. I feel like there are certain guys who are opportunists or opportunistic and I have experienced that . . . I see that [disposition] coming a mile away. You are just looking out for yourself. You are not interested in me. You are interested in who you can become because of me. It is a bit difficult to explain but, quite a few guys, especially older guys because they have had some rough years, they are looking for how you can help them to improve [themselves]."

Nancy continued to describe and discuss men that wanted to use her. She then settled on her SALA status by saying, "You have to see that they are into you because of you, not because of what you can do for them . . . I think it [my SALA status] is by choice. Nancy was not willing to tolerate "opportunistic men or guys who just want to play around."

Like, Nancy, Carrie uses caution around potential dating opportunities as a motivator for why she has decided to remain single. Reflecting on her previous relationships, Carrie says, "I have made clear choices. I was engaged when I was younger and, called that engagement. I have been in a couple of relationships certainly since then but not the right person at the right time. So that is why I say it is by choice." Renita also describes her singlehood as a choice. Going further, Renita challenges society to reconsider their perception of singlehood within the Black community as "a bad thing."

> It's sad that society or the black community [views] being single as a bad thing. It's not necessarily a bad thing. I see a lot of people who are married who really wish they were single, for whatever reason that may be. I'm happy. I'm alone by choice. I do know I won't settle. I will never settle just to have someone there. That old mindset, "A piece of man is better than no man at all," it's a lie. I will never, never, ever do that.

Nancy, Carrie, and Renita's stories suggest that their current SALA status and decisions are informed by their previous circumstances. Their explicit assertion that they are SALA by choice is tempered somewhat by the implicit acknowledgement that their previous dating experiences and circumstances are woven into the threads of their SALA status. While it is possible this group of SALA women are aware that the oppressive institutional constraints facing Black Americans is greatly relevant, whether directly or indirectly, in preventing these three Black women, and others like them in the cohort, from partaking in fulfilling and rewarding romantic relationships, it is not something they publicly discuss in their interviews.

Choosing SALA Driven by Personal Experience and/or Aspirations

For some of the women in the Cohort, including those unable to provide a clear answer to whether their SALA status was due to choices, circumstances, or both, the future played a salient role in their explanations and framing of their SALA status. Specifically, while content with their current choice to

be single, some Black women anticipated being in a relationship, particularly when other things such as obtaining a certain degree of personal growth had been achieved. Madison for example, exemplified this attitude:

> Staying single allows me more time to feel more complete and whole as a person, as an individual. Once I start feeling more complete as an individual and once, I start doing more of the things I find personally fulfilling, achieving personal goals and dreams and aspirations then I feel like I'll meet someone.

Madison's rearticulation of her single status as choice dependent on her achievement of personal growth, is a positive outlook of a constraining dating market. It also reinforces neoliberal perspectives of personal achievement to be prepared for the right one.

SALA Black women like Madison, view their singlehood as an opportunity to continue to work on themselves, so they are prepared for future marriage opportunities. In this way, navigating SALA within the Love Jones Cohort is a combination of circumstance and choice. The circumstance is prolonged singlehood, and the choice to rearticulate singlehood as an opportunity for personal improvement in preparation to uphold the social desirability of marriage. This theme is consistent with previous findings on the inequalities of love college educated Black women encounter whereby they manage romantic partnering inequities by focusing on personal improvement (Clarke, 2011).

Moving from framing how Black women in the Love Jones Cohort, in particular Nancy, Carrie, Madison, and Renita, understand and frame their SALA status by an amalgamation of choice and circumstance; we turn to how Black women in the cohort, specifically Olivia, London, and Ashley navigate their SALA status.

Safety and SALA Status

Black women within the Love Jones Cohort mentioned physical and psychological safety as points of concern for navigating their SALA status. SALA Black women respondents confronted their safety concerns by being selective of the neighborhoods they chose to live. SALA Black middle-class women tend to choose neighborhoods that includes varying levels of interactions with neighbors, to protect their physical and psychological well-being.

Coupling these notions together, London shared that when she purchased her condo, she purposely selected a top-floor unit to further ensure her safety, especially since she worked late nights. "I tend to work late at night, so that was important, that I felt safe when I came home. It's not even 7:00 pm and they already have our security van driving around our complex. [Safety] is also the reason why I selected the top floor. I'm a single person now. I won't live on the first floor. I won't live on the second. I want to be on the top."

London's concern with constructing physical and psychological forms of safety for themselves underscores how gender social inequality is embedded in singlehood. Physical concerns regarding safety could be the possibility of gendered-racial assault, and therefore London selecting the top floor of a condominium complex to navigate the possibility of being over-surveilled as a SALA with late working hours. And psychological safety concerns could be overly or under surveilled in certain communities.

Concern for personal safety was also discussed in navigating SALA status and loneliness. Although some women in the cohort expressed situational loneliness—bouts of loneliness (which can be social or emotional) that ebb and flow over short periods of time, with levels of intensity that range from mild to moderate (but rarely intense)—they were not willing to settle for an unfulfilling or placeholding romantic relationship to overcome these temporary feelings (Marsh, *forthcoming*). Instead, they would simply take it day by day. For example, while describing her SALA framed medical fears, Olivia introduced her non-routine work schedule and said, "people aren't going to realize I'm dead for probably a couple of days because I work from home at least two days out the week." Olivia then provides a possible solution, "maybe I should get a puppy so that at least the dog would whine or bark to alert people something was amiss."

To manage safety and loneliness, SALA Black middle-class women discussed various strategies they employed to protect both their physical and psychological well-being. For example, Ashely laughed with ease as she described coloring, in adult coloring books, as a form of de-stressing and coping. Ashley's prioritization of self-care and management of mental well-being through coloring books, serves as an example of how Black women within the Love Jones Cohort rearticulate the meaning of their SALA status. Moreover, it shows that these Black women in the Love Jones Cohort are willing to maintain a positive orientation to their SALA status, instead of succumbing to situations that do not allow them to embody healthy romantic relationships.

As SALA's, London, Olivia, and Ashley's narratives underscore the meaning of singlehood at the intersection of race, gender, and class. Although SALA Black middle-class women are embodying singlehood instead of undesirable romantic partnerships, they also are aware of some challenges associated with singlehood, namely safety and loneliness. Accordingly, unlike the broader literature on singlehood, which predominantly frames singlehood as being mostly agentic without considering structural inequality ((Kislev, 2019; Klinenberg, 2013; DePaulo, 2006), this group of SALA's show how singlehood is an empowering choice, and a response to structural inequality in that, Black SALA's concerns regarding safety and loneliness are heightened because of their racialized and gendered daily experiences.

Discussion

These Black women in the Love Jones Cohort are striving daily to make choices about their well-being that considers their status as SALA Black middle-class women. As learned, Black women within the Love Jones Cohort are dealing with a constrained dating market due to a variety of structural factors including economic constraints, and the gendered "marriage squeeze." Instead of choosing to be partnered with men who they believe do not contribute positively, they are choosing to remain single, and are finding a multitude of ways to construct physical and psychological well-being, and safety for themselves. And when encountering challenges of loneliness, SALA Black middle-class women appear to prioritize self-care practices.

Our findings reveal how the response to singlehood among a group of Black middle-class women is connected to race, gender, and class. That is, SALA Black middle-class women are navigating singlehood from the standpoint of knowingly, or in this case, unknowingly recognizing that the interconnectedness between structural racism, structural sexism, and structural gendered racism shapes their dating and marriage prospects. Instead of responding with a respectable form of Black womanhood, SALA Black middle-class women within the Love Jones Cohort are choosing to remain single, which is a form of engagement with "disrespectability politics" and "strategic singlehood" (Cooper, 2017, 2018; Moorman, 2020). Accordingly, what does SALA Black middle-class women within the Love Jones Cohort reveal about marriage? Is it a benefit or a burden?

Marriage: A Benefit or a Burden?

This paper focuses on expanding knowledge about the experiences of SALA Black women within the Love Jones Cohort. These women are Black and middle-class, and they are single. And while research shows that even with the gendered "marriage squeeze," Black women within the middle-class still get married at much higher rates than working-poor Black women (Cohen & Pepin, 2018), it is still hard for Black middle-class women to strike a marital bargain. In contrast to SALA Black middle-class women, Black middle-class women who are married, are reported to be trading in self-reliance for marriage (Barnes, 2015). As mentioned, Council (2021) argues that the trading in of self-reliance for marriage among Black middle-class women, is connected to the networks of support marriage appears to provide them, especially as it relates to childrearing, safety, and kin networks (Council, 2021). But SALA Black middle-class women are also accessing networks of support that also includes a recognition and need for safety. So, what purpose does marriage continue to hold among Black middle-class women?

Can this research show the other side of the same coin? That is SALA Black women within the Love Jones Cohort are an example of how Black women within a declining welfare state and a neoliberal society constrained by gendered racism are strategizing choices allowing for self-actualization despite structural inequalities within the dating culture. Similarly, Black women who are getting married are also responding to the declining welfare state and a neoliberal society by continuing to forge marriages that provide them access to resources. And in both cases, Black women are finding ways to access love and intimacy. Future research needs to examine Black women within the middle-class, intimacy choices more, particularly how SALA and married Black women reify and redefine respectability politics related to romantic partnering.

Conclusion

This research explored the uniqueness of the Black women in the Love Jones Cohort. The core theme was to understand the unique lifestyle of the Black women in the Love Jones Cohort, and how their intersecting identities of race, class, gender, and singleness inform their lifestyle as well as shape how they manage life decisions. This article also raises the question about the utility of Black marriage among Black middle-class women. There are two

implications from this study. First, membership in the Love Jones Cohort might be by both choice and circumstances. To base SALA status solely on individual behavior without contextualizing structure is shortsighted. Second, although some Black women in the Love Jones Cohort experience mental health and well-being challenges; they have developed strategic singlehood strategies (Moorman, 2020). These strategies range from the incorporation of self-care practices to residential neighborhood choices.

In this article we learn that an amalgamation of structural forces and individual behaviors help to explain the rise in Black singles, the Love Jones Cohort, and especially for Black women in the study. The theoretical implication calls for a collective action among those interested in this topic. It is important that one considers or continues to offer a multilevel approach to singlehood among Black women in America. An approach that favors both individual agentic choice *and* structural factors (Clarke, 2011). This study suggests that the intersecting identities of the Black women in the Love Jones Cohort, shape them, their lifestyles, decision making processes related to romantic partnering, and singlehood as SALA.

There are a bevy of factors that lead to the emergence of the Love Jones Cohort with an overrepresentation of Black women. The low hanging fruit response is that it is a personal issue among the Black singles. The more complicated and critical answer requires one to open their lens, take a broader more aerial view, and envision how symbolic structures and factors must complicate the overly simplistic explanation that something is wrong with those in the Love Jones Cohort—they are just too picky, difficult, career driven, and selfish for a meaningful relationship.

Despite the emergence of the Love Jones Cohort, corresponding to the U.S. Census definition, they are not considered families but a household. According to 2019 updated subject definitions by the U.S. Census Bureau on family and household, SALA are still considered households not families.[2] There should be consideration taken on expanding the family definition so that SALA are included as a family. Following the logic employed by Census definitions, SALA are a family of one. They are related to themselves.

We must question the term family. It can be viewed as exclusionary on various fronts. The term brothers and sisters in a family can exclude transgender individuals.[3] The LGBTQIA+ community have both embraced and contested the term (Moore, 2011). Scholars have asserted that the term family has racial and cultural variance and praises the strengths of various Black families especially augmented families—non-related individuals

(Billingsley, 1968). Furthermore, Black serving institutions need to have a reckoning with the term family, the Black church is not exempt (Moultrie, 2021).

The Love Jones Cohort tell us that their friends are central to their lifestyle. We need to embrace and institutionalize augmented families, where the Love Jones Cohort can establish families alone or with friends, in a legal manner. This allows the Love Jones Cohort family to access benefits from benign cell phone plans to more substantive advantages in the realm of asset management and wealth planning in these augmented families—this means we should consider implementing the idea of *The Love Jones Cohort Family Plan* or the *SALA Family Plan* into our social institutions (Marsh, *forthcoming*).

Successful women in the Black middle class are incessantly faced with the question: *Why are you not married and why do you not have children?* Effectively, this question superimposes a deficit framework on the Love Jones Cohort, suggesting that no level of success is complete until a person is married with children. In learning more about the Love Jones Cohort, this will spark a more general line of inquiry for people to ponder, which can also help Black Americans see themselves in a range of household compositions outside of the marital bond. Specifically, people will ask themselves: Is my understanding of the Black middle class based on implicit or explicit notions of respectability politics? Am I able to acknowledge how demographic changes and structural limits shape (and reshape) the Black middle class and how we think about a family? Am I limited by a stereotypical view of what the quintessential Black middle class family should look like?

Either directly or indirectly, this paper attempts to speak to the questions embedded in respectability politics and constantly asked of the Love Jones Cohort by scholars, researchers, politicians, family members, friends, and even complete strangers: Why are you not married and why do you not have children? Regarding these unwelcomed questions, this article concludes with a series of counter-questions that unpack the assumptions underlying these original questions.

Although our study has revealed the meaning of singlehood at the intersection of race, gender, and class, it is not without its limitations. This study does not discuss the importance of family and friend networks among the Black middle-class, which has been examined in previous scholarship. The incorporation of family and friend support networks has often allowed

Black middle-class women to manage marriage, motherhood, and work demands. However, we cannot at present address how important family and friend networks are for SALA Black middle-class women. Future research should examine if and how family and friend networks serve as anchors for SALA Black middle-class women who are choosing to forego unhealthy romantic partnerships by maintaining their status as single (See Marsh, *forthcoming*).

Before someone ask a Black woman "Why are you not married and why do you not have children?" They should ask themselves two interrelated questions. First, is it discriminatory to ask the Love Jones Cohort why they are single and child-free? Especially, if similar questions are not asked of married couples—such as why they are married and with children. Second, is it problematic to be uninformed on how structural forces shape individual behavior before asking the Love Jones Cohort why they are single and child-free? If then, the person cannot provide and answer to these rhetorical questions, or one that excludes structural impediments, then perhaps it is time to move away from *why* many Black women are SALA, toward a love ethic embracing SALA Black women and the many ways they contribute to their families and communities as Black woman on a journey toward self-definition.

....·

LaToya Council is an Assistant Professor of Sociology and Africana Studies at Lehigh University. Her research interests are race, gender, and class; work and family; health and wellness.

Kris Marsh is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Maryland. Previously, Professor Marsh was a postdoctoral scholar at the Carolina Population Center at the University of North Carolina, a visiting researcher at the University of Southern California and Fulbright Scholar in South Africa at the University of Witwatersrand and the University of Johannesburg. Professor Marsh's areas of expertise are the Black middle class, demography, racial residential segregation, and education.

Notes

1. Those that have never been married or partnered but can be dating.

2. https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps/technical-documentation/subject-definitions.html#:~:text=A%20family%20household%20is%20a,to%20the%20number%20of%20families.

3. https://keywords.nyupress.org/african-american-studies/essay/family/

References

Barnes, R. J. D. (2015). *Raising the Race: Black Career Women Redefine Marriage, Motherhood, and Community*. Rutgers University Press.

Billingsley, A. (1968). *Black families in white America*. Prentice-Hall. http://books.google.com/books?id=0HREAAAAIAAJ

Blackman, L., Clayton, O., Glenn, N., Malone-Colon, L., & Roberts, A. (2005). *Consequences of Marriage for African Americans: A Comprehensive Literature Review*. 5.

Broman, C. L. (1993). Race Differences in Marital Well-Being. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 55*(3), 724–732. https://doi.org/10.2307/353352

Broman, C. L. (2005). Marital Quality in Black and White Marriages. *Journal of Family Issues, 26*(4), 431–441. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X04272439

Bryant, C. M., Taylor, R. J., Lincoln, K. D., Chatters, L. M., & Jackson, J. S. (2008). Marital Satisfaction Among African Americans and Black Caribbeans: Findings From the National Survey of American Life*. *Family Relations, 57*(2), 239–253. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3729.2008.00497.x

Chaney, C. (2010). "Like Siamese Twins": Relationship Meaning Among Married African-American Couples. *Marriage & Family Review, 46*(8), 510–537. https://doi.org/10.1080/01494929.2010.543037

Chaney, C., & Marsh, K. (2008). Factors That Facilitate Relationship Entry Among Married and Cohabiting African Americans. *Marriage & Family Review, 45*(1), 26–51. https://doi.org/10.1080/01494920802537423

Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*. SAGE.

Cherlin, A. J. (1998). Marriage and Marital Dissolution Among Black Americans. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies, 29*(1), 147–158. https://doi.org/10.3138/jcfs.29.1.147

Clarke, A. Y. (2011). *Inequalities of Love: College-Educated Black Women and the Barriers to Romance and Family*. Duke University Press.

Cohen, P. N., & Pepin, J. R. (2018). *Unequal Marriage Markets: Sex Ratios and First Marriage among Black and White Women*. Socius, 4, 2378023118791084. https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023118791084

Collins, P. H. (2004). Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism. Routledge.

Collins, P. H. (2009). *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Routledge.

Collins, P. H. (2015). Intersectionality's Definitional Dilemmas. *Annual Review of Sociology, 41* (1), 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-073014-112142

Collins, P. H., & Bilge, S. (2020). *Intersectionality*. John Wiley & Sons.

Cooper, B. C. (2017). *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women*. University of Illinois Press.

Cooper, B. (2018). *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower*. St. Martin's Publishing Group.

Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of Qualitative Research (3rd ed.): Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*. SAGE Publications, Inc. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452230153

Cottom, T. M. (2018). *Thick: And Other Essays*. The New Press.

Council, L. D. (2021). Marriage matters for Black middle-class women: A review of Black American marriages, work, and family life. *Sociology Compass, 15*(11), e12934. https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12934

Crenshaw, K. (1990). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review, 43*(6), 1241–1300. https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/stflr43&i=1257

Darity Jr, W. A., & Myers Jr, S. L. (1995). 9 Family Structure And The Marginalization Of Black Men: Policy Implications. The Decline in Marriage among African Americans: Causes, Consequences, and Policy Implications, 263.

Dean, P., Marsh, K., & Landry, B. (2013). Cultural Contradiction or Integration? Work–Family Schemas of Black Middle Class Mothers. In M. H. Kohlman, D. B. Krieg, & B. J. Dickerson (Eds.), *Notions of Family: Intersectional Perspectives* (Vol. 17, pp. 137–158). Emerald Group Publishing Limited. https://doi.org/10.1108/S1529-2126(2013)0000017010

DePaulo, B. M. (2006). *Singled Out: How Singles Are Stereotyped, Stigmatized, and Ignored, and Still Live Happily Ever After*. Macmillan.

Dickson, L., & Marsh, K. (2008). The Love Jones Cohort: A New Face of the Black Middle Class? *Black Women, Gender + Families, 2*(1), 84–105. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/blacwomegendfami.2.1.0084

Dillaway, H., & Broman, C. (2001). Race, Class, and Gender Differences in Marital Satisfaction and Divisions of Household Labor Among Dual-Earner Couples: A Case for Intersectional Analysis. *Journal of Family Issues, 22*(3), 309–327. https://doi.org/10.1177/019251301022003003

Higginbotham E. B. (1993). *Righteous discontent : the women's movement in the black baptist church 1880–1920*. Harvard University Press.

Hill, M. E. (2020). "You Can Have It All, Just Not at the Same Time": Why Doctoral Students are Actively Choosing Singlehood. *Gender Issues, 37*(4), 315–339. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12147-020-09249-0

Jenkins, A. I. C., Fredman, S. J., Le, Y., Sun, X., Brick, T. R., Skinner, O. D., & McHale, S. M. (2020). Prospective associations between depressive symptoms and marital satisfaction in Black couples. *Journal of Family Psychology, 34*(1), 12–23. https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000573

Johnson, K. R., & Loscocco, K. (2015). Black marriage through the prism of gender, race, and class. *Journal of Black Studies, 46*(2), 142–171.

Kislev, E. (2019). *Happy Singlehood: The Rising Acceptance and Celebration of Solo Living*. Univ of California Press.

Klinenberg, E. (2013). *Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise and Surprising Appeal of Living Alone*. Penguin.

Landor, A., & Barr, A. (2018). Politics of Respectability, Colorism, and the Terms of Social Exchange in Family Research. *Journal of Family Theory & Review, 10*(2), 330–347. https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12264

LaPierre, T. A., & Hill, S. A. (2013). Examining Status Discrepant Marriages and Marital Quality at the Intersections of Gender, Race, and Class. In M. H. Kohlman, D. B.

Krieg, & B. J. Dickerson (Eds.), *Notions of Family: Intersectional Perspectives* (Vol. 17, pp. 113–136). Emerald Group Publishing Limited. https://doi.org/10.1108/S1529-2126 (2013)0000017009

Luna, Z., & Pirtle, W. (2021). *Black Feminist Sociology: Perspectives and Praxis*. Routledge.

Marks, L. D., Hopkins, K., Chaney, C., Monroe, P. A., Nesteruk, O., & Sasser, D. D. (2008). "Together, We Are Strong": A Qualitative Study of Happy, Enduring African American Marriages*. *Family Relations, 57*(2), 172–185. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741 -3729.2008.00492.x

Marsh, K. (Forthcoming). *The Love Jones Cohort: Single and Living Alone in the Black Middle Class*. Cambridge University Press.

Marsh, K., Darity, W. A., Jr., Cohen, P. N., Casper, L. M., & Salters, D. (2007). The Emerging Black Middle Class: Single and Living Alone. *Social Forces, 86*(2), 735–762. https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/86.2.735

Marsh, K., & von Lockette, N. D. (2011). Racial and Ethnic Differences in Women's Marriage, Household Composition and Class Status: 1980–2008. *Race, Gender & Class, 18*(1/2), 314–330. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23884881

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook*. SAGE.

Moore, M. (2011). *Invisible Families: Gay Identities, Relationships, and Motherhood Among Black Women*. University of California Press.

Moorman, J. D. (2020). Socializing Singlehood: Personal, Interpersonal, and Sociocultural Factors Shaping Black Women's Single Lives. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 44*(4), 431–449. https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684320939070

Moultrie, M. (2021). "Making Myself." *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 49(2), 314–336. https://doi.org/10.1111/jore.12353

Mouzon, D. M., Taylor, R. J., & Chatters, L. M. (2020). Gender differences in marriage, romantic involvement, and desire for romantic involvement among older African Americans. *PLoS ONE*, 15(5). https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0233836

Nash, J. C. (2018). *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality*. Duke University Press.

St. Vil, N. M., McDonald, K. B., & Cross-Barnet, C. (2018). A Qualitative Study of Black Married Couples' Relationships With Their Extended Family Networks. Families in Society, 99(1), 56–66. https://doi.org/10.1177/1044389418756847

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. M. (1997). *Grounded Theory in Practice*. SAGE.

Tucker, M. B., & Mitchell-Kernan, C. (1995). *The Decline in Marriage Among African Americans: Causes, Consequences, and Policy Implications*. Russell Sage Foundation.

Wilson, W. J. (1978, 2012). *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions*, Third Edition. University of Chicago Press.