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The UMB Pulse Podcast

How Can Black Fathers-in-Law and Sons-in-Law Create Healthy Relationships

FEBRUARY 14, 2023 UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND BALTIMORE SEASON 3 EPISODE 3

The UMB Pulse Podcast

How Can Black Fathers-in-Law

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Charles Schelle: 0:00

Happy Valentine's Day, Laura Lee.

Laura Lee: 0:03

Oh, thank you. Happy Valentine's Day to you, Charles.

Charles Schelle: 0:05

Yes. Uh, I, I miss having those, Valentine's Day cards and, in elementary school of all things, right? Yes. Like, I don't know if you've ever had that, like, where you would have the bags lined up and everyone would pick out their valentine.

Laura Lee: 0:19

With those little chalky hearts. Yeah. Yeah.

Charles Schelle: 0:21

Yeah, Now has your husband given you any sort of like Valentine's Day card? How, how do you do Valentine's Day? Is it just gonna be another Tuesday this year?

Laura Lee: 0:30

Well, it depends. Um, this year I think we're gonna do something special. Cause I have a special something for him, so he doesn't know it, but he's gonna get a Valentine's Day surprise.

Charles Schelle: 0:42

Oh. Well, hopefully we won't spoil it. And since, you know, say special occasions I should mention you are a, uh, guest host this episode. So tell everyone what you do at U M B.

Laura Lee: 0:53

Yes. So I work in the Office of Communications and Public Affairs and I am a media relations specialist

Charles Schelle: 0:59

And you cover what schools and areas?

Laura Lee: 1:03

I cover the law school, the School of Dentistry, and the BioPark.

Charles Schelle: 1:07

Well, you're gonna get to know another school today, the School of Social Work. We bring up Valentine's Day because this is a bonus episode. We're talking about in-law relationships, about the healthy ties between Black father-in-laws and sons in-laws as an offshoot of our, regular episode. Earlier this month, Dana, Jena, and I talked to University of Maryland School of Social Work professors Geoff Greif and Michael Woolley about how couples on their way to getting married should know some tips about their soon to be in-laws. And if you're an in-law, what should you do to help foster a strong relationship?

Laura Lee: 1:43

So not every marriage is the same, right?

Charles Schelle: 1:45

Right.

Laura Lee: 1:46

Isn't that the saying?

Charles Schelle: 1:47

I think so.

Laura Lee: 1:48

Geoff and Michael shared the nuances for a wide range of in-law relationships, but there's another study that examines the healthy bonds between Black fathers in-law and sons-in-law.

Charles Schelle: 1:59

University of Maryland School of Social Work Assistant Professor Ericka Lewis and Baylor University, Diana R Garland School of Social Work Assistant Professor Brianna Lemons are the authors of the study, "The Ties That Bind: An Exploration of Son-in-Law And Father-in-Law of Relationships in Black Families." Michael Woolley is also a co-author of that study, Which you'll find a link to in our show notes. Dr. Lewis and Dr. Lemmons will help share some advice and lessons to help Black families strengthen those ties.

Jena Frick: 2:35

You are listening to the heartbeat of the University of Maryland, Baltimore, The UMB Pulse!

Charles Schelle: 2:47

Erica Lewis and Brianna Lemons. Great to see you again.

Ericka Lewis: 2:52

Thank you. It's good to be here.

Brianna Lemmons: 2:54

Yes. Good to see you too.

Charles Schelle: 2:55

Both of us know a little bit about each other. When, um, I did, media relations for the University of Maryland School of Social Work, and this is a great topic to, to revisit. Again, it's Valentine's Day,, but before we get to know about couples and in-laws, tell us a little bit about yourselves and how you two know each other, being from different institutions.

Brianna Lemmons: 3:16

Dr. Lewis and I met, uh, during our doctoral studies. Uh, so I was a, a student at, um, Howard University, and I believe Dr. Lewis at Georgia State, correct?

Ericka Lewis: 3:27

Uh, Washington University

Brianna Lemmons: 3:29

Oh, that's right.

Ericka Lewis: 3:29

Yeah. Yeah.

Brianna Lemmons: 3:30

And so we were both in our doctoral studies, uh, and had, uh, done a fellowship through, um, the Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. Uh, we were both fellows in their, uh, child wellbeing fellowship. And so that's how we met and we found this commonality in our passion and interest for doing fatherhood work. Um, and so that's where our relationship. began

Laura Lee: 3:53

We're gonna be talking about father-in-law and son-in-law relationships, but your research is overall focused on fathers. Um, why focus on dads?

Ericka Lewis: 4:03

There's so many reasons. But for us, uh, we focus on dads because they are part of the family system. And they really do make such a, a great impact, uh, on the family and the outcomes. And so what Brianna and I found, uh, was that father's, as we were, you know, studying family systems that fathers were not, uh, talked about as much as, we thought they should be, especially from our experiences with our own fathers. And we weren't seeing it in the literature and we wondered why. A lot of our studies have really focused on highlighting, uh, the contributions that fathers bring to children and families.

Brianna Lemmons: 4:37

And I'll just add to that by saying that, this work for me is very personal. And it really comes from a strengths-based perspective. It comes from my, the positive experiences I've, that I've had with my father and the ways in which she has shaped me, uh, into the woman that I've become. Today, but I also saw him struggle in his role as a father to my, my non-resident siblings, so the siblings that didn't live in the home with us. I knew his story and I knew that there were so many other men out there like him. And so a lot of what I seek to do in my work, um, in addition to what Dr. Lewis has shared, is really to change the narrative on Black fathers in particular, and providing them with a space to share their stories and, and uplift their voices, in the family literature.

Charles Schelle: 5:17

Great. Thanks for sharing that. And when we last talked, uh, a couple years ago about this research, Ericka, you said that you thought that the relationships were interesting. The in-law relationships were interesting because of the Black family dynamic. Can you describe what those dynamics are? And then I guess, I'm sure they, they tie into the, the fatherhood aspect, too.

Ericka Lewis: 5:38

Right. Well, I first, I'd like to say that there's a lot of diversity and fluidity, uh, within the Black family structure. Right. But there were, as we were looking at the study or as we were, uh, analyzing the data. There was a few dynamics that really stood out for us. Uh, one was this idea around, uh, rituals and gatherings and how important they were. So it was around this, this idea of including people in the families and celebrations. So weddings, the birth of a child Any type of gathering in, in that nature was really

important. Another idea around this Brown Black family dynamics was, uh, the values and the principles, that are inherent among family members and generations. So having respect for folks that who are older than you, so your elders. The sense of having a responsibility for your families, being a provider and a protector. And I think the last piece was around, This idea that it, it, it really does take a village approach where people, family members were expected to help one another out, um, and exchange resources so that, you know, families were better off, in the end.

Brianna Lemmons: 6:45

Just as an anecdote, uh, that I was going back to what Dr. Lewis just shared about, um, the, the centrality of culture and the importance of culture and the diversity within, um, within Black families. And I think in this study we intentionally used the word Black because it's more inclusive. We actually had a couple of participants in our study from Africa, so one from Eritrea and the other from Rwanda. And then the rest of our sample was from within the U.S. And so I think I really just wanna make clear for listeners, the importance of culture, in, in all of this. And, and just one anecdote, I was talking with a friend recently who's from Mali and I was talking with her about the podcast today and what I was preparing for. And she said to me, well, in African families, you know, it's expected that the in-law lives with the family. So in her family, her mother lives with her brother and his wife, and her brother has been tasked with taking care of the mother. And so in, in that context, it's expected. And so I think it's important as we talk about in-law relationships to recognize the importance in this centrality of culture in all of this.

Charles Schelle: 7:53

Yeah, that's a really good point because, you know, we hear about other cultures where there's multi-generations sometimes, um, in a household and, and you don't expect that or find that traditionally in American households. And, uh, and it, and I just kind of wonder through those examples of where they're used to, having either multi-generations in there and then the in-laws at some point, if that created any sort of extra pressure of having your having to live with, literally live with your in-laws.

Ericka Lewis: 8:26

Yeah, there were a few fathers, uh, in this study who talked about having, so for instance, there was one father or son-in-law who talked about having, uh, the father-in-law move in, um, with him and his wife and how, you know, of course it was something that was expected. You, you take care of the father-in-law, you take care of your elder. But the, the father-in-law was very, He had a lot of opinions on how the family should run and how the household should run. And so, uh, the son-in-law was having issues trying to balance that respect for the elder, uh, versus, you know, this is my house, these are my rules, you're a guest.

Charles Schelle: 9:04

Oh wow.

Ericka Lewis: 9:05

So, yeah, it's, it was really, it's, it was so interesting to, to read the interviews, um, and, and hear the interviews cuz they were also audio recorded. So it was, it was interesting to hear all of that.

Laura Lee: 9:18

Just as a, as a follow up, we were talking about the difference, the cultural differences within the Black community. How is the Black father or son-in-law experience different maybe than from, uh, Charles called it the American experience, um, but maybe it's the could we, could we call, also, call it maybe the white experience and it's broad, but are there differences that you can point out?

Ericka Lewis: 9:44

So I, I think it's important to, to first say that there were some commonalities between white in-laws and Black in-laws. But there were also a few differences and I, I think really for us, the focus was, um, trying to figure out the role of culture and how it played in the family relationship because as, uh, Brianna was saying earlier, culture is so important, especially in the Black community. And so, if I'm looking for differences, I think there was, there was something around rituals that was really important. So again, the weddings, the birth of children, that really changed the relationship, uh, for the better for, uh, the Black fathers and son-in-laws in our study, uh, that we did not find in the white father-in-laws and son-in-laws, and not, not to that extent, the same extent. When Black father-in-laws and son-in-laws were asked about, you know, when did your relationship change for the better? It was usually around these events where people are added to the family, where you're gaining family, whether it be through weddings or birth. Um, and that was a, a major difference.

Brianna Lemmons: 10:47

I would add to that, that this whole issue of respect. It's very, it is very big among Black men in particular. I think some of that could come from a, a biblical standpoint in terms of, what the Bible has to say about the role of men and women and families and the, the importance of respect and the wife respecting the husband that's, That comes from a biblical, uh, basis. And so I think because of the role of spirituality in Black families, this could be something that's very central and very, very specific that we find within Black families. Because I, I listened to the, the interview with Dr. Greif and Dr. Woolley and I didn't hear as much, uh, conversation on this whole issue of respect. In addition to that, I think that, um, one of the major themes in our paper was validation. This need for validation, um, and oftentimes that need for validation. Came from the women in the family. So the women in the family were often the ones to shepherd the son-in-law in and say, Hey, he's a good guy. Like he's good people. You know? And so that was really, really important, um, for sort of the father-in-law, kind of checking the box and saying like, you're good. You're okay. You know? So I think that was also something that, uh, really stood out in our work as well, that, that I don't see in, in more more American family kinds of studies.

Ericka Lewis: 12:03

I I did wanna add one thing around this role of provider and protector, and I think that that was a, a theme that came up a lot, uh, specifically to the Black father-in-laws and son-in-laws. And I often, I wonder if discrimination racism had something to do with, uh, this idea of for father-in-laws, if I am giving the okay for, for you to come into the family son-in-law, I need to know that you're gonna be able to provide for my, my daughter, but also protect her from the outside world. Um, and we saw that, um, quite a bit in the interviews that we didn't see as much, um, with, with white father-in-laws and son-in-laws.

Charles Schelle: 12:46

Can you touch on a little bit more about that with, the importance of protection and you mentioned some of those underlying themes, but to educate everyone a little bit more about the, the importance of that role.

Brianna Lemmons: 12:56

I think that that relationship that exists between the daughter and the father, um, is something that I think oftentimes father-in-laws expect to maintain. Um, and I think oftentimes when, when they give their daughters away, they look at it as though, okay, now you're in charge. You know, now you are responsible for protecting my daughter. This has been my role her entire life, and so now I am giving her away to you. And so that giving away that happens during the, the marriage ceremony is, is symbolic for you're, you're the provider now. You're the protector now. And so I have these expectations as your father-in-law that you will continue to carry on the role that I've played in my daughter's life for her entire.

Ericka Lewis: 13:44

Right. And it was interesting cuz it was even, uh, with father-in-laws who didn't have the best relationship, uh, with their, their daughters, they still had the expectation that son-in-laws would be the provider, be the protector, um, you know, from the outside world. And I think it kind of goes, it goes back to this idea of Black family dynamics and the importance of family, right? And the importance of your family, uh, being your safe space. So whatever's happening out in the world that you can come back to your family, you have them as a support system, and they will, they'll shelter you or they're. Almost act as a buffer, um, from what you may experience, um, as a person of Color, um, out in the world. And so that was something that kept ringing true. Will you be able to be that buffer, be that protection? Uh, for, for my daughter?

Brianna Lemmons: 14:37

I think that stems from larger, you know, cultural ideals in, in terms of what the role of the man is in the family. Um, you know, we know that men have pressures to provide in ways that women often do not. Um, and I think that the role of provider, um, is, is even more pressure there when it comes to men of Color, oftentimes because we know the structural inequities that often exist in society that don't allow Black men to provide for

their families in the same ways that that other men are able to. So I think that that pressure of being a provider is it, it comes from this larger cultural dynamic, but then it's, it's also an additional added pressure when we look at fathers of Color.

Laura Lee: 15:19

Um, and going back to culture again, um, So your study was based on the Afro, I wanna make sure I get this right, the Afrocentric Intergeneration Solidarity Model. Could you kind of explain what that is for those of us who are not deep into the world of, of social work and how it informed your study?

Ericka Lewis: 15:39

There's an original model that is the intergenerational solidarity, uh, model, which looks at how relationships are formed by family members across generations. And so the Afrocentric, uh, model, uh, that was actually developed by, um, a scholar. Dr. Waits, really looks specifically at Black culture, Black principles, um, Black values, um, and it infuses it with the intergenerational solidarity model. I love music. I almost see it as a remix, right, of it's taking a little bit of the original, but then adding, uh, something extra an an extra beat if you will. Maybe another, an additional artist. And so it. You know, again, those solidarity principles, uh, also have this, um, this focus on Afrocentric, uh, values. So this idea of collectivism, um, the idea of roles and responsibilities, uh, the respect for the elders. These are pieces that were added in, um, to the model to make it just. I would say maybe it yields like richer understanding of the Black experience, um, when thinking about, you know, relationships across generations.

Laura Lee: 16:54

Going back to the study a little bit more, in, in your study you interviewed Black married men ranging in ages from 29 to 52 with participants being married from four to 17 years. That's a wide range of experience. Um, so what does it mean to be a good father-in-law or a good son-in-law? And what are the main takeaways from your work?

Brianna Lemmons: 17:16

I think that part of what it means to be a good father-in-law, son-in-law, this kind of touches on, um, some of the advice as well in, in some of the, the, the major themes that we found, um, in the study is being intentional. Um, being willing to extend the olive branch. We found that intentionality is a foundational aspect of the relationship building process between male in-laws. Son-in-laws expressed that making intentional efforts to engage in collective activities and provide mutual support was vital to building a relationship with their fathers, uh, father-in-laws rather. So I think, part of it is, is being intentional. It's being willing to, to be vulnerable in your relationship with your father-in-law or the father-in-law's relationship with the son-in-law. I think it's being open to that relationship building process and realizing that it's not going to be a given. It's something that has to be built over time. So many families are impacted and families come together, um, through the in-law relationship. When, when, when individuals get married, several families are merged together. And so understanding

how that merging happens and, and being willing to go through the necessary process of building those relationships and understanding that it takes time, um, for those things to happen, I think is a, a part of what it means to be a good father-in-law or, or son-in-law. Just being open. One of the things that I really enjoyed about doing this study is that it's a, it's a very understudied relationship. Um, and it's a very ambiguous one. And so I, uh, I empathize with, with all, uh, in-laws trying to make these relationships work. Uh, and, and you know, it's not clear, this is one of the relationships in the American family that we just don't really talk about very much. And so nobody really knows what to do, when to do and how to do. Uh, and so I think it's just understanding that and being open to what the relationship can look like and can be.

Charles Schelle: 19:14

Going back to what you mentioned about expectations. I can imagine that has to be, A little bit of anxiety inducing for, for the son-in-law. So, and the son-in-law probably has a lot of things that he wants to get off his chest too. So, with those expectations, are they really good about communicating what they expect on both ends? Especially the, you know, the son-in-law being brave enough to, to tell the father-in-law, like, Hey, this is, this is what you know, I'm hoping to do here.

Brianna Lemmons: 19:40

Yeah, if I can recall correctly, and certainly Dr. Lewis, um, weigh in on this, but I think communication was a major issue. Um, in our study. I think that both sides, father-in-law and son-in-law had expectations of one another, but many of them were unspoken ones. Um, and so I think that that often created a rift there, um, because they, they, you know, for example, um, son-in-laws often desire to have an emotional connection. There was an expectation of, um, an emotional connection from the son-in-law, but that was not always necessarily communicated. And this was in particular when the son-in-law, uh, did not have a relationship with his own father. And so one of the things that stood out to me in the interview that you all did with Dr. Greif and Dr. Woolley is that oftentimes with these in-law relationships, sometimes they can fulfill a long unmet need, and in this case, the unmet need is I've never had a father in my life. I would love for you to be that father figure to me. I just don't know how to tell you that. Right. And so I think that that was often the scenario, uh, in, in many, in many of these men's lives,

Charles Schelle: 20:53

Yeah. That, that's tough. That is tough. So Did they share any, any advice as far as, you know, for the ones that were able to make that breakthrough about, you know, this, this is how I mustered up the courage, or maybe we did something. You mentioned how like activities were, are a big part of it. Maybe that set the scene to, to have that conversation.

Ericka Lewis: 21:15

It wasn't. I, I think there, there was this, um, It's idea of just being patient, waiting for father-in-laws to come around, um, and sometimes adjusting expectations so they

knew, for instance, uh, son-in-laws talked about just having more opportunities to do things that they both like, uh, to do. And from there, there would be natural conversations that happened and they would be able to, you know, to bond. Um, and so that was something that was, was helpful, but also son-in-laws understood the generational differences and that Their father-in-laws came from a generation where you have a few, you have a set number of friends and you have a very tight circle, and those are the people that you communicate with and you don't open yourself up necessarily or um, so easily to other people. And so son-in-laws talked about being patient through that process. And so just trying to find opportunities where they can connect with their father-in-laws, um, was really important, which I think is something that still rings true. I. You know, talking about the study with, uh, my brother-in-law, um, and asked him like, how was it to do these things, um, make sense or did you also have this, these same hiccups? Um, and trying to get to know my father. Um, and he definitely said yes. Uh, you know, my father is a, a listener and not so much of a, of a talker. And so he could be saying a lot of things with his face, but you're not getting a full monologue from him. You're not gonna get a long-winded story, but he's fully engaged. And so understanding that that is a connection, even if it's not, what, say my brother-in-law would, would expect from his time with his friends or his communication pattern with his friends. So it's really interesting seeing some of the findings in the study ringing true and, uh, personal family setting.

Laura Lee: 23:07

So you talk about, um, son-in-laws sitting back and being patient and waiting for an older generation who maybe doesn't communicate the same way to come around. Is there any other kind of advice that you can give to father-in-laws and son-in-laws to help improve their relationships that you found from your work?

Brianna Lemmons: 23:29

So I would say, uh, one of the things that that can be done is to start to build these relationships early. Um, oftentimes, uh, these relationships don't really, uh, start to come together until maybe a child is born or a, uh, a problem arises or there's a financial need or, whatever the case may be. But I think as, as early, even in the dating phase. You know, as early as possible ,because one of, one of our biggest themes was understanding values and expectations. Um, because oftentimes unmet expectations lead to frustration. Um, and so I think it's important to understand from the very beginning, what does my father-in-law value? What does he expect, right. So, uh, one of the things that came up in, um, again, and I keep referencing the Greif and Woolley interview, but, uh, one of the things that they mentioned that really stood out to me is to be curious about your in-law, right? So, uh, they are the ones who raised the person that you're, you're, you're in love with. They really encourage, you know, starting early, being curious, creating a personalized relationship. And I think that's also important is like, I'm not just hanging out with you because I'm married to your daughter. I'm hanging out with you because I really like you, and, and, and really like, you know,

wanting to have that personal relationship. Like this is the relationship that I am choosing to enter into, that I am choosing to have that is separate and apart from my daughter. I genuinely want to get to know you. I'm not just engaging with you because my wife says, if I don't engage with you, I'm gonna be on the couch tonight. You know, like I, I really want this relationship. Um, so I, I think that's very important as well is, is starting early, being curious, getting to know each other's values and expectations, those that are spoken and unspoken.

Ericka Lewis: 25:10

The only other thing I would add is this idea of validation. So because, uh, being present, Other folks, um, maybe even singing your praises can help build that relationship sooner. Um, you know, having son-in-laws go to family gatherings go to have these opportunities to be with the family as a whole so that other family members can see how invested, uh, the son-in-law is. And, you know, word gets around that, that this person's in it for the long haul and, and that can help bring the, the father-in-law, um, around and really start that, that relationship, uh, bonding, uh, a little sooner.

Laura Lee: 25:50

It sounds like you have to start with the mother-in-law. You have to make sure that she likes you, and then she goes and talks to her husband.

Ericka Lewis: 25:57

And other family members. But yes, definitely the mother-in-law does not hurt. Having her on board, uh, as a constant, uh, sense of validation is a, a great approach.

Brianna Lemmons: 26:09

The women is still the gatekeeper in many ways, in, in families. Um, I found similar things in my work on other topics, related to co-parenting and things of that nature, where women were the gatekeeper. If there was a problem in the family that was going on where the, the father wasn't getting along with the child's mother, it was. Usually in the maternal mother that bridge that gap that was able to stand in the gap and say, okay, I'm gonna be the mediator. I'm gonna bring you two together. I'm gonna make sure that you get, each of you gets to spend the time with the children. So oftentimes that is the case in, in Black families in particular. The, the women play a huge role in maintaining a, a, a positive family dynamic.

Charles Schelle: 26:53

And that's interesting that you, that you bring that up because, the, the study centers on, on the healthy bonds between the fathers and sons in-laws. And I was wondering if you were going into the research expecting to hear a lot about the mother-in-law's role and, and to maintain those bonds.

Ericka Lewis: 27:08

I, I didn't expect it, so it was a, a pleasant surprise, but once I started reading the transcripts, I was like, you know what? This makes sense. I could see it, I definitely could

see it in my own, in my personal relationships as well as just what was seen in the, in the stories through the data. So I was pleasantly surprised.

Brianna Lemmons: 27:25

Me too. Me too. Same. I, I expected it actually just because of, you know, other work that I've done, um, where, where I've, you know, come to, to understand the vital role of women, uh, in families. And, and like Dr. Lewis said, I've, in my own personal experience, I've seen this and know this to be true. I was not surprised, but I, I was glad to, to see this particular theme surface.

Charles Schelle: 27:50

Great. You brought this up a, uh, a couple of times and it's also could be a signal of being in it for the long haul, but, but children, when, when a child gets added to the family, now the mother-in-law's, a, a grandmother, you have a grandfather. So how does that really change the dynamics of, of those bonds and, and, you know, is it, again, I'm going back to expectations,

Ericka Lewis: 28:15

Well, I, I definitely think, that, grandparents, so father-in-laws are needed more. Um, it could be for advice, um, because oftentimes, uh, son-in-laws in a new role for them being a parent. And so being able to go to their father-in-law, they have that relationship to ask for advice. Um, also around just asking, uh, for help with childcare or, um, even sometimes financial help. Can they borrow money? Can they help out with certain, things around the house that, that are needed? And so children, it feels like children are a really great opportunity for father-in-laws and son-in-laws to bond because they definitely have that in common outside of, uh, the daughter. There's more opportunities for this social fathering where father-in-laws can really be a mentor and an elder to, to give advice, uh, to, to son-in-laws and son-in-laws seem to, from our study, seem to be more willing to take advice, um, about parenting versus anything else. That can really be an area for, for the relationship to build or an opportunity.

Charles Schelle: 29:22

That's interesting. What, why do you think that is that, that they're more receptive to, to the parenting advice?

Ericka Lewis: 29:27

Maybe it's because there is this, this new role, um, and so fa maybe son-in-laws, if, if they're new fathers, they're not expected to know it all, but they'd like to hear from the experiences of their father-in-law. That, that's what I'm thinking is that it's a new experience. Maybe there's something around masculinity like asking. You know, your father-in-law, how to be a better husband is a bit more, makes you a bit more vulnerable than asking about a caretaking or this role of being a provider and a protector, which is something that Black men in our study, and I think in other parts of, of culture can, it's a expected. So that's something that I can't ask for advice and I won't be seen as less than.

Laura Lee: 30:10

I'm curious to know from your study, who the father-in-law or the son-in-law, who was the most interested in cultivating a relationship or what did it go both ways? Was it the son-in-laws who were, wanted their, you know, father-in-law's approval, or was it the father-in-law who wanted to get to know the son-in-law? Or was it equal?

Brianna Lemmons: 30:32

If I can recall correctly, I think it was more of the son-in-law. Who desired to have the relationship with the father-in-law. And it was almost kind of like the father-in-law was sitting back waiting and saying like, you know, I'm gonna wait on you to come to me, or I'm gonna wait on you to, to build this relationship with me. So I think it was more of the son-in-law. Yeah. That desire to have that relationship. And because the father-in-law in some cases was not as proactive. The son-in-laws kind of felt like there was a, a struggle there, and so I think it was definitely more initiative being taken by the son-in-law.

Ericka Lewis: 31:10

Right. I agree.

Charles Schelle: 31:12

Let's say, this is the month of love with Valentine's Day. You're getting pretty serious, maybe thinking engagement. If you're that future, you know, son-in-law, how do you, how do you make that kind of first contact, uh, or maybe increased contact and relationship with that future father-in-law? What, what maybe are some pieces of advice to help open up that dialogue?

Ericka Lewis: 31:38

I think it's around these family activities or traditions. So looking for those celebrations to be a part of those gatherings is really important. Um, and then this idea of shared activities. So even finding out from, um, the spouse or the, the wife or, you know, potential wife, what their father likes to do. Um, then the son-in-law can invite the father-in-law to share in fishing, um, Fixing things around the house, maybe a basketball game, uh, music. So things of that nature where they can at least start out, um, participating in an activity that they both would find enjoyable and then building from there.

Laura Lee: 32:20

Yeah. I seem to recall that, um, in your work, you mentioned that a son-in-law said he learned a lot about his father-in-law when they played cards together, you know, finding those kind of things that they can, can do together that they both enjoy.

Ericka Lewis: 32:33

Yeah, you can find a lot out about people in general from cards. I think spades will teach you a lot about people.

Charles Schelle: 32:40

Do you have any other anecdotes? I remember one that, that I put in, in my story about how one man said they went to a comedy show together, and, you know, he says father-in-law had tears in his eyes from just crying so hard. And he is like, I've, I've never seen that side of him before. And it just, you know, just changed things. You know, what other types of, like, stories like that. Ha. Have you, have you heard?

Ericka Lewis: 33:04

There was, um, a father who, or son-in-law who talked about a father, his father-in-law being promoted at work and so attending that celebration and seeing his father-in-law, so excited, so proud to have this accomplishment, but also to show him off and introduce him as his son-in-law, um, was something that was, was pivotal.

Brianna Lemmons: 33:25

And I'll just add to that and say, I think overall, um, one of the, the takeaways is, is building a relationship in, in a low stakes, low pressure, uh, kind of environment that, that feels organic and that feels genuine. I think is, is is the key, um, because I, I think these things happen over time and you get to know people over time and it's, it's not forced. It's something where both, Um, men cuz we're, we are talking about men and we know that men express themselves in, in, in different ways than women and have needs that are different than women. Um, and I think what's important, many times for, for men is, is, is that it, it is enforcing that it's natural and that they're able to, to develop that bond in, in their own way and, and on their own terms. And not simply because there's a marriage or because there's an expectation from, you know, someone external to that relationship, but that they're able to just build it naturally and in a way that feels genuine.

Laura Lee: 34:24

After you heard some of the responses from, from your participants, did any of them resonate with you or did any, did you, think for any of those answers. Oh, I need to share this with my, you know, my girlfriends or I, I could use this in my own relationship.

Ericka Lewis: 34:41

I think one thing that stood out was, the importance of building the relationship for son-in-laws. A lot of it had to do with, possibly strengthening their relationship with their wife or their spouse, and so, Even when the father-in-law wasn't as receptive, even when the father-in-law and the son-in-law, or the father-in-law and the daughter didn't have the greatest relationship, um, son-in-law still made that effort to connect with their father-in-laws. Because if they could, if they could help bridge that gap between the daughter and the father-in-law, that uh, their relationship with their significant other would improve. And I found that really interesting. For so many reasons. But you know, mainly because they can see how, relationships between children and, and parents, how that can impact other relationships, with people. And so it's important to

when thinking in this family setting to try to strengthen relationships in every place that makes sense, in every place that is, is possible. So that was really interesting.

Brianna Lemmons: 35:42

I think overall for me, I, through doing this study, I came to understand how important, um, the in-law relationship is for strengthening Black families, um, in general. It's an opportunity, right? For, for father-in-laws to, to model for their son-in-laws, what, what fathering looks like, what being a husband looks like. It's a context in which, um, healthy family development can take place in understanding how the family dynamic changes when all of these families are merged. And there was another powerful thing that came up in the, uh, interview with Dr. Greif and Dr. Woolley which is that when we enter into in-law relationships, we're not entering them alone. We are entering in and we're merging the father's family with the, uh, or the, whether the son-in-law's family with the daughter's family, with the new family that they're creating together. And not only that, but each person is bringing into that relationship their own family dynamic and trajectory and from their family of origin. Um, and so that's a very powerful thing to, to see all of these different dynamics colliding at once and, and learning how to navigate that. Um, and so I think that that just the in-law relationship itself is really. One that is, is the power of it is not fully understood in terms of what it can bring and what it can do for the strengthening of families across generations.

Charles Schelle: 37:19

Yeah, that's, think about like holiday traditions, right? That, that families have and just that debate of like, all right, who's hosting Christmas? Are we visiting your in-laws or mine first? Simple things like that can, can turn into a mess, if, if someone's really passionate about, their family traditions and, and who's showing up.

Brianna Lemmons: 37:39

Mm-hmm.

Ericka Lewis: 37:40

Yeah. Mm-hmm.

Charles Schelle: 37:41

So with, with all your findings with, with the in-law research and, and how much you're finding about, like, the father's roles we mentioned at the top about your father focused research. So, has this informed or, or helped your, your other research that, that you're looking at for those father relationships?

Ericka Lewis: 38:01

It has. Uh, so Brianna and I wanna work together forever. I'm gonna speak to, for both of us. Uh, and so we look for these opportunities to, to really integrate what we found in this study and other studies. Uh, one study now that we're we're working on is looking at how to better involve fathers in their child's academic outcomes. And so what are the barriers and facilitators for fathers to engage in that type of of support. And one thing that we wanted to understand are what are the supports for fathers?

And one thing you think that we'll be finding is having support from in-laws, having support from elders, um, and, and folks of that nature to help then increase that engagement. And so we are just looking for opportunities where supports for fathers include intergenerational aspects, whether they be father-in-laws or fathers, grandfathers, or other family members, um, because support systems are really important, especially in Black families.

Brianna Lemmons: 39:00

And I'll just add to that and say that through doing this work, I became really inspired to continue along this line. This is the first time that I've ever done a study of this nature, and it just didn't occur to me how understudied the in-law relationship is until I did this. So it's really inspired me to do more work in this area and we didn't pull out as many cultural themes as, as I would have wanted to. Um, and that I think are probably there and that we hadn't quite tapped because our sample size was 11. I think that if we had continued to sample and our sample size was larger, I think that those cultural nuances would've showed up in such a, uh, in a much richer way. I really wanna go more in depth with this, and I think we need more ethnographic research would allow, which would allow for more in-depth long-term immersion, uh, into a culture to really understand these cultural nuances. Because, after doing this, I'm convinced that culture plays a major, major role here. And so I would love to do further work on other cultures, African, the African culture, all Black families throughout the African diaspora, right? Because there are so many differences and nuances there. We are such a diverse group of people. I think it's important to study within group differences as it relates to the in-law relationship.

Charles Schelle: 40:20

I definitely look forward to that study. Hopefully, you know, you have many more, published works to come on this.

Laura Lee: 40:26

Dr. Lewis and Dr. Lemons, I just wanna thank you so much for this incredible, journey through the Black Family Experience and we look forward to hearing more about your research in the future.

Ericka Lewis: 40:39

Thank you. This is wonderful.

Brianna Lemmons: 40:41

Thank you.

Jena Frick: 40:47

The U M B Pulse with Charles Schelle, Dana Rampolla, and Jena Frick is a U M B Office of Communications and Public Affairs production. Edited by Charles Schelle, sound engineering by Jena Frick. Marketing by Dana Rampolla.

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