

UNCOMFORTABLE CONVERSATIONS WITH A BLACK MAN

BOOK DIGEST

PICKING UP THE PIECES

The Black Family Struggle

QUESTION

“WHY DO YOU THINK MANY AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITIES ARE PLAGUED WITH POVERTY, CRIME, AND ALSO THE LACK OF PRESENCE OF A FATHER FIGURE IN THE HOME? IS THIS ALL BECAUSE OF OPPRESSION?”

“The breakdown of the black community, in order to maintain slavery, began with the breakdown of the black family. Men and women were not legally allowed to get married because you couldn’t have that kind of love. It might get in the way of the economics of slavery. Your children could be taken from you and literally sold down the river.—Kerry Washington”

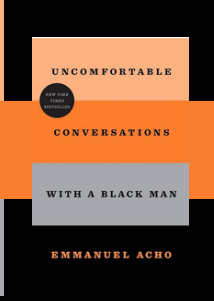
This was a harder chapter to write for our author, because it is the furthest from his lived experience. It can be hard for white folks to relate to it too, because the majority of white people (76%) grew up with the presence of both of their parents (whether or not they lived in the same home). Emmanuel Acho’s father only missed ONE of all his football games. His father never drank. His mother went back to college to get a doctoral degree in her fifties. His parents never cursed. He became who he is thanks to the inspiration they provided.

He then reflects on the experience of one of his former NFL teammates, Earl Wolff, and how Earl was raised by his grandmother and by his mother who had to join the military to support her family financially. That led his mother to put her life on the line when she was stationed in Kuwait—and to Earl experiencing constant fears that she might not come back when he would not hear from her for several days in a row.

Emmanuel Acho explains:

“Black families have much higher rates of single-parent homes. Those single-parent homes mean less income and a greater risk of poverty. Those homes also produce higher dropout rates, higher teenage pregnancy rates, and greater chances of being involved in the justice system—and a host of other negative outcomes.”

So he invites us all to reflect on what has done the breaking of those families in the first place.



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LET'S REWIND

Twenty four years before slavery ended, a man named Cekar Pugh wrote a letter to a slave owner from North Carolina to inquire on the possibility of buying his own grandchild so that he would care for him in his old age. M. Pugh was looking for his enslaved daughter whom last name he didn't know. He didn't know either his grandson's name. And one can only imagine the reasons that would lead him to want to buy his grandchild as a caretaker. Emmanuel Acho wonders:

"Does this mean he's been indoctrinated to see his own kin as property now?"

"Can you imagine living as a free person but knowing your daughter, your grand-children, were still in bondage?"

Reflecting on slavery is paramount when seeking to understand the phenomenon of broken black families.

Enslaved people were considered as PROPERTY—not persons... They couldn't enter any contract which included marriage agreements. They could only enter precarious non-“legal” unions. If man and wife were “owned” by different households, it was called an abroad marriage. A father would then get to visit his family once a week, if he had managed to do all of his work (and if he could walk the miles separating him from them). Kids were put to work by the time they reached what should have been their school age. No father could be a breadwinner in that context. And any family could be broken apart by the slave owners on any day.

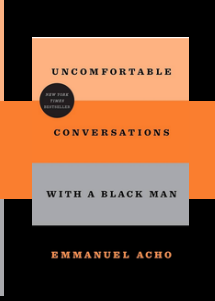
Thousands of black folks tried to reunite with their families after the Civil War. There are records of hundreds of place advertisements in newspapers. Parents would visit the places from which they were sold to try and find their children. Thousands got to finally formalize their marriages.

Those are proof that dispelled the abject argument that black people are genetically disposed to experience broken families. And, of course, it is also very easy to just look over sea and witness the importance of family ties in Africa.

"If this book has emphasized anything, it's that history has a huge part to play on what kind of America we live in now."

He adds:

"What we see of the black family is the legacy of America's first black families."



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He also writes that:

“Lots of scholars argue that you can draw a straight line between too many black single-parent households today and the severe economic hardship after emancipation.”

Black folks were promised “forty acres and a mule” but they received black codes instead that created a system updating slave-master relationships to peasant-feudal lord status. To support their families, mothers had to work and couldn’t stay home with the children and fathers were either forced into sharecropping or out of work. And resources for schooling were of course minimal.

The U.S. assistant secretary Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote [The Negro Family: The Case for National Action](#) (The Moynihan report) in 1965. He highlighted the links between family structure and black poverty and how it impacted equality.

President Johnson appointed three years later a committee, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (or Kerner Commission), to investigate racial divisions. They published a blistering report, [the Kerner report](#) from which the most famous lines are:

“Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal.”

They also highlighted the detrimental role of the media that “basked in a white world”.

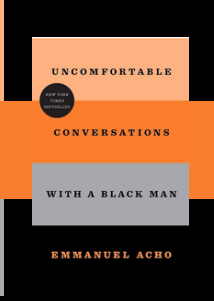
When taking a look to our local broadcast, we’re still most likely to witness two extremes: black people who are athletes or entertainers and portrayed as demigods or black people depicted as poor or criminal. He remarks:

“Imagine the whiplash, the parallel messaging about possibilities for the future to any young black children watching.”

Those narratives are highly detrimental to black people’s self-esteem—and they’ve been replayed so many times that many white people believe that broken black families are a natural state.

He writes:

“Someone with healthy self esteem may be able to, say, ignore people assuming they have no father figure or overcome the real obstacles of that situation. But what about the person who never sees relatable images of themselves, who doesn’t hear themselves on TV, who begins to disbelieve in their worth as a human being? How does that person become a positive member of a healthy family?”



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The impact of systemic racism on black people's mental health is staggering:

- One in four black Americans experience anxiety.
- They face Racial Battle Fatigue, a state including anxiety, worry, hypervigilance, headaches, and increased blood pressure.
- One in ten black people have PTSD.
- They're 20% more at risk to suffer serious psychological distress.
- Suicide is the first leading cause of death for black folks between 15 and 24 yo.

"It's tougher to keep a family together when you're fighting for your mental health, if not your life."

He concludes this session with this:

"Let's not forget the unequal education system, the stereotypes that vilify young black men, the justice system that forms a prison pipeline, discrimination in hiring, and for good measure, those racist housing practices. All of those things work together to destabilize black people, making it harder and harder to keep families intact."

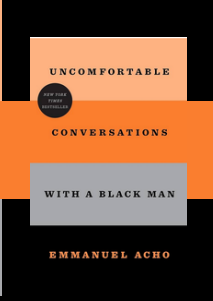
LET'S GET UNCOMFORTABLE

The goal is not to bring up guilt about what has happened, the goal is to unearth the context of what led to today's circumstances. Which includes, as our author highlights:

"Asking what role whiteness has played in the breaking."

"I now know so much more about the pain of my black brothers and sisters and how much more black children have to work to overcome and defy the odds."

Because we all need to partner up to change the odds that so many young black folks face.



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TALK IT, WALK IT

Emmanuel Acho urges us to **help dismantle the myth that broken black families come from nature and not culture.**

He invites us to bring context and talk about the history of slavery, as well as the damages done by media portrayals and systemic racism.

He also invites us to choose more precise words and to talk of broken-apart families instead.

And as usual, he shares a lot of helpful resources:

- To mentor young black people: Big Brothers Big Sisters (www.bbbs.org), the National Mentoring Resource Center
- Donating resources (including time) to underfunded school
- Advocating for corporate giving towards at-risk youth or single parents
- Read the aforementioned reports: The Moynihan Report, The Kerner Report
- Support black art (visual arts, books, music and films)
- Read or watch: If Beale Street Could Talk (book by James Baldwin, film by Barry Jenkins)

"Tell your friends when you like something.

As more of these projects become profitable, more of them will exist in the world.

The more that exist, the greater likelihood of nuanced depictions of black people.

The more nuanced the depictions, the better to combat harmful stereotypes.

the greater the chance of broadening perspectives about black people."