

Introduction

This sociological study centers on the Love Jones Cohort, revealing the ways in which this demographic group live their lives. 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 or those treated as a group.¹ The characters in the *Love Jones* movie are young, educated Black professionals who have never been married, are child-free, and live alone or with unmarried non-romantic friends.

The Love Jones Cohort: Single and Living Alone in the Black Middle Class focuses on the lifestyles of those within the Black middle class who are SALA – single *and* living alone – and how their single status shapes their decision-making processes. While much has been written about both the Black middle class and the rise in singlehood, this book represents a first foray into bridging these two concepts.² In doing so, it provides a more nuanced understanding of how intersecting social identities, coupled with social structures, shape five central lifestyle factors of the Love Jones Cohort: (1) defining family and friends, and deciding on whether and how to pursue romantic relationships; (2) articulating the ebbs and flows of being Black and middle class; (3) selecting where to live and why; (4) accumulating and disseminating wealth; and (5) maintaining overall health and well-being.

For this study, 62 Black adults were interviewed over the course of summer 2015, 43 of whom were women and 19 men. Ages ranged from

¹ This movie celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2022.

² Put another way, as a sociologist and demographer who has published quantitative scholarship on this topic, *The Love Jones Cohort: Single and Living Alone in the Black Middle Class* puts “metaphorical” meat on the “numerical” bones that I have published over the years.

25 to 56, with the mean (average) age being 38. Although women dominated those interviewed, I made the intellectual decision to fashion this book around single Black middle-class adults living alone, including *both* women and men. Where possible, I highlight age and gender differences.

In 2019, I attended a three-day retirement symposium for William Julius Wilson. Wilson is a well-decorated sociologist and Harvard University Professor Emeritus. Social scientists have polarized views of Wilson, with some considering him revolutionary and others viewing him as controversial and conservative. The timing, with fall semester having just started at the University of Maryland, could not have been worse for me to travel to Harvard for the event. In addition to my regular responsibilities as a professor, I was in the middle of grappling with the “so-what” question of this book; training police officers at the Prince George’s County Police Department – who patrol one of the wealthiest Black counties in the country – on understanding implicit bias; and immersing myself in the golf culture by volunteering at Enterprise Golf Course (also in Prince George’s County) in order to help conceptualize a research project on how Black golfers navigate racism, sexism, and classism on the golf course. However, I decided to attend Wilson’s retirement symposium because his scholarship, as well as that of many of his students, were and continue to be essential to my research agenda on the Black middle class.

On the final day of the retirement symposium, Wilson clearly, concisely, and with great passion reiterated the premise of his widely popular 1978 text, *The Declining Significance of Race*. According to Wilson, the book’s title garnered more attention than the actual arguments laid out within, prompting conservatives to sing the book’s praises and liberals to rebuke it with stinging criticism. However, as Wilson pointed out, once people got around to reading the book, it came under heavy criticism from conservatives – in part due to his emphasis on structural impediments – while liberals gave it an enthusiastic thumbs-up. As he retired from six decades of scholarship, Wilson wanted to state for the record the theoretical assumptions underpinning his book, attempting once and for all to silence his critics by leaving no room for ambiguity. In doing so, Wilson noted that he made two distinct arguments in his book: a class-based argument and a politically driven assertion.³

³ For the political assertion, Wilson asserts that “the center of racial conflict and tension has shifted from the economic sector, which characterized American race relations throughout most of our history, to the social political order.” Wilson goes on to state that “racial tensions and a manifestation of racism are products of situations. Economic situations.

Wilson spoke passionately about the class-based argument in his closing salutation to the discipline, claiming, “Economic class has become more important than race and determines the life trajectory of Black individuals, which helps to explain the growth of the Black middle class and the increasing divide between the haves and the have-nots in the Black community.”⁴

Listening to Wilson, I remembered two pivotal arguments advanced by my colleagues. First, in an interview conducted for the Washington Center for Equitable Growth in 2017, Duke professor and economist (and my mentor, coauthor, and friend) William “Sandy” Darity Jr. notes:

The core of stratification economics offers a structural rather than a behavioral explanation for economic inequality between socially identified groups. . . . Stratification economics goes against the grain of trying to argue that the kinds of differences that we observe, and economic outcomes are attributable to cultural practices or some forms of dysfunctional behavior on the part of the group that’s in the relatively inferior position. . . . Economists and other social scientists must look at social structures and policies to really explain why those differences exist.⁵

Second, in the opening lines of the 2015 *Annual Review of Sociology* article, Distinguished University of Maryland Professor Emerita Patricia, and author of the often-cited *Black Feminist Thought*, Hill Collins (2015) illuminates the interdependent concerns of intersectionality as a field of study, analytical strategy, and/or critical praxis: “The term intersectionality references the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but rather as reciprocally constructing phenomena” (p. 1).⁶

It was at this point that I truly understood the sociological significance of this book. The manuscript draws on the Love Jones Cohort’s intersecting identities to highlight how structural impediments, social structures,

Political situations. Social situations. In previous years, the situations creating racial tensions and conflict were concentrated in the economic sector. Today they are featured in the political sphere and in social situations involving housing, schooling, criminal justice and, most recently, immigration.” Wilson ended this section of his symposium speech by emphatically noting that these were the arguments he was making in 1978, when *The Declining Significance of Race* was published.

⁴ For a complete narrative of Wilson’s retirement reflects, visit The Hutchins Center for African and African American Research at Harvard University.

⁵ For the complete interview with Dr. William “Sandy” Darity Jr., visit the following website: <https://equitablegrowth.org/equitable-growth-in-conversation-an-interview-with-william-a-darity-jr-sandy-of-duke-university/>

⁶ For writing from early Black feminists such as Sojourner Truth, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and Anna Julia Cooper, see Guy-Sheftall, B. (1995).

policies, and practices shape their existence, emergence, acceptance, and inclusion as a lifestyle and family within the larger Black middle class.

In 2012, a popular text by sociologist Eric Klinenberg entitled *Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise and Surprising Appeal of Living Alone* was published in which the author addresses the well-documented rise in singlehood as a social *change*, not a social *problem*. In particular, Klinenberg finds that only a small percentage of his living alone respondents are isolated or lonely.⁷ Even so, Klinenberg does not draw much attention to any specific race or class dimensions. Meanwhile, in 2019, sociologist Elyakim Kislev published a book examining the emotional well-being of singlehood entitled *Happy Singlehood: The Rising Acceptance and Celebration of Solo Living*. Kislev studies the levels of happiness of people who have been married versus those who never married *and* how the aging process influences the latter's acceptance of their relationship status. In doing so, he suggests that as they age, the never married emerge as happiest, due in part to their ability to build solid friendship networks over time (Kislev 2002a; Kislev 2022b). Just a month following publication of Kislev's book, I joined friends on a spring break trip to Jerusalem, where Kislev resides. Always up for an opportunity to discuss singlehood, I sent Kislev an email a few days before leaving the States, and upon receiving a warm response, I arranged to meet him in downtown Jerusalem.

The pending meeting had me mildly nervous, as I was concerned the criticism I was planning on leveling at his book – the omission of race – might not be well received. Yet the conversation was refreshing, bouncing around from critique to future collaborations, back to criticisms, to laughter, and to long periods of silence signaling our intense thinking. We walked away from this meeting acknowledging that singlehood might look differently for Black people in countries where they do not form the majority – globally and in the US. – compared to the dominant group, in this case white people.⁸ These racial differences are due, in large part, to structural factors.

⁷ www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/eric-klinenberg-on-going-solo-19299815/

⁸ Throughout the book, I capitalize “Black” but not “white.” My rationale stems from that put forth by the Associated Press (AP). In September 2020, AP changed its usage rules by capitalizing Black when discussing race and culture, while choosing not to do the same for whites. Their rationale was that “white people in general have much less shared history and culture, and do not have the experience of being discriminated against because of their skin color.” <https://apnews.com/article/entertainment-cultures-race-and-ethnicity-us-news-ap-top-news-7e36c00c5af0436abc09e051261fff1f>

In 2011, prior to these two groundbreaking books on singlehood making waves in the academic and commercial worlds, Kate Bolick – later the author of a 2015 book on singlehood – wrote a piece for *The Atlantic* titled, “All the Single Ladies.”⁹ In the article, Bolick states:

Recent years have seen an explosion of male joblessness and a steep decline in men’s life prospects that have disrupted the “romantic market” in ways that narrow a marriage-minded woman’s options: increasingly, her choice is between deadbeats (whose numbers are rising) and playboys (whose power is growing). But this strange state of affairs also presents an opportunity: as the economy evolves, it’s time to embrace new ideas about romance and family – and to acknowledge the end of “traditional” marriage as society’s highest ideal.

The undercurrent of the article seems to suggest that white single women are *choosing* to be single by embracing an “ideology that values emotional fulfillment above all else” and “the elevation of independence over coupling” (Bolick, 2011). By contrast, *The Love Jones Cohort* considers how racism, discrimination, and gender racism make it less clear whether singlehood among Black people – especially Black women – is by choice or circumstance.

In 1987, sociologist Bart Landry wrote his seminal book, *The New Black Middle Class*. In his study, Landry asserts that Black women’s best option for financial stability and reaching middle-class status is marrying and joining the labor market outside the home alongside their working husbands. Landry assumes the association between marriage and middle-class status as necessary for the economic stability of the Black middle class. *The Love Jones Cohort* provides counterevidence to some of Landry’s earlier claims by asserting that a subset of Black SALA households have solid incomes, degrees, occupations, assets; are child- and spouse-free; and count themselves as members of the Black middle class.

Collectively, these theoretical frameworks, assertions, and arguments help shape the premise of this book. Given the anti-Black sentiment that exists in social institutions, as well as structural forces, systematic inequalities, institutional racism, gendered racism,¹⁰ and stratification, the reasons

⁹ Named after Beyonce’s song “Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)”. www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/11/all-the-single-ladies/308654/

¹⁰ The term “gendered racism” was coined by critical race, gender, and leadership scholar Philomena Essed (1991) and refers to the notion that racism is gendered in ways that mean the everyday lives of Black women and men are impacted differently (Essed, 1991, p. 31). Although not exhaustive, other evolving terms, concepts, frameworks, or analytical tools related to intersectionality and gendered racism include: *structural gendered racism* (“the totality of interconnectedness between structural racism and structural sexism in

for singlehood can be different for Black people compared to other racial or ethnic groups. Thus, the resulting overarching theme of *The Love Jones Cohort* is to investigate the lifestyles and distinctiveness of Black women and men who are both SALA and in the Black middle class.

In writing this book, I grappled with whether to use the term SALA to refer to Black women and men who are single and living alone, or instead utilize “solo,” which is more often used in the US media when naming the general population of singles. Ultimately, I decided to use SALA for two key reasons. First, the experiences of Black people are different from the general US population. Conflating the two terms essentially collapses the experiences of Black communities into a white framework, discounting the effects of institutional racism and systematic inequalities faced by Black Americans. Second, Black SALAs have traversed singlehood for decades and, percentage-wise, started outpacing their white counterparts in 1960 – a racial gap that has widened in every decade since (Ruggles et al., 2022). Specifically, at the start of the twentieth century, 16% of Black adults and 20% of white adults had never been married; by 1960, there was racial crossover; and by 2019, 45% of Black adults had never married compared to 24% of their white counterparts. (See Appendix A for an illustration of the data.) Changing SALA to solo dilutes these demographic shifts, potentially undermining the path Black SALA pioneers may have paved for the solo generation.¹¹

shaping race and gender inequities”) (Luna & Pirtle, 2021); *gendered anti-Blackness belonging* (“the institutionalized ideologies and everyday practices that structurally place African descendant women as out of place, and Other or nonhuman, against which whiteness is measured as structurally in place and normative (Kilomba, 2021)” (Curington et al., 2021); *structural intersectionality* (“the consequences of multiple systems of oppression, involving systematic subordination and exclusion of marginalized groups with respect to resources, opportunities, and freedoms in major social institutions”) (Homan et al., 2021); *New Jane Crow* (draws from the term *Jane Crow* by Pauli Murray and “symbolizes the connection between the blatant disregard of civil liberties and constitutional protections of African Americans during the post-Reconstruction period and the current plight of women”) (Goodwin, 2021); *misogynoir* (“describes the ways anti-Black and misogynistic representation shape broader ideas about Black women, particularly in visual culture and digital spaces) (Bailey, 2010, 2021; Bailey & Trudy, 2018); *double jeopardy* (to address the dual oppressions of racism and sexism that continued to disenfranchise Black women) (Francis Beal, 1988).

¹¹ From its inception, feminism excluded Black women. One response led to Sojourner Truth to demand “Ain’t I a woman?” in a speech in 1851 delivered at the Women’s Rights Conventions in Akron, Ohio. Another response was *Black Feminist Thought* by Patricia Hill Collins in 1990. *The Love Jones Cohort: Single and Living Alone in the Black Middle Class* represents a similar type of response to singlehood. The singlehood movement and scholarship seem to be taking on a similar trend of exclusion and a white orientation. An

The Love Jones Cohort seeks to address these gaps in the literature while centering the voices of those who are SALA in the Black middle class. In doing so, the book moves beyond merely exploring dating practices, marital status, and who is having children or not, by engaging in a more nuanced and intimate look at the lifestyles of the Love Jones Cohort and how structural forces shape their choices and lives.

The Love Jones Cohort Term

Recent media portrayals suggest that the Black middle class has a new face. Previously, the media stereotype for the middle class – whether Black or white – had been the married couple with children. For the Black middle class, this was exemplified by the Huxtable Family from *The Cosby Show* (1984–1992), a sitcom following the lives of a father (an obstetrician), a mother (a corporate attorney), and five happy, intelligent, and adorable children. Then, in the 1990s, a surge of television sitcoms and films arrived, 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.

The first of these was the sitcom *Living Single* (1993–1998), which centered on the lives, loves, and careers of six Black friends living in a Brooklyn brownstone.¹² *Girlfriends* (2000–2008), another popular sitcom, revolved around the lives and loves of four Black women with a similar demographic profile to the principals of *Living Single*. More recent television entries centering on singles include *Being Mary Jane* (2013–2019), which followed a young Black cable news anchor, and *Insecure* (2016–2021), in which Black female best friends deal with insecurities, career and relationship challenges, a seemingly endless series of uncomfortable everyday experiences, and a variety of social and racial issues relating to the contemporary Black experience.

Meanwhile, on the big screen, films depicting this new demographic profile include *The Brothers* (2001), *Two Can Play That Game* (2001), and *Deliver Us From Eva* (2003), all of which followed in the wake of *Love Jones*

orientation also found in music, with the appropriation of rock ‘n’ roll by Elvis Presley. Yet few know the gospel singer and electric guitar player Sister Rosetta Tharpe as the godmother of rock ‘n’ roll and/or “the original soul sister.”

¹² *Friends*, following the lives of six white twentysomething educated professionals living in Manhattan, premiered the following year and ran until 2004.

(1997), starring 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 lovers, and deals with relationship decisions, premarital sex, personality and physical characteristic preferences, gender income differentials, and the realization that growing old and single might have health implications. The film remains a definitive, frequently referenced staple movie within Black culture. This is not only because it is endearing and well acted but also because more than 25 years later, it remains relevant.

The demographic represented in these films and sitcoms is what Sandy Darity Jr. coined, and I am calling “The Love Jones Cohort” – a term that was developed over coffee on a hot and humid summer day in 2016 in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. I was discussing with Sandy, my mentor and preceptor for my postdoctoral position in the Carolina Population Center at the University of North Carolina, how, on both the big and small screens, I was noticing a demographic shift in Black protagonists away from married couples to single adults. As we talked about the idea that *Love Jones* depicted exactly the group I was interested in studying, Sandy suggested, “Well, you can play on words by integrating your demographic training and interest in the movie by calling this group ‘The Love Jones Cohort’.” I quickly agreed, and just like that the term was born.

On the one hand, the terms “SALA” and “Love Jones Cohort” are not interchangeable.¹³ 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).¹⁴ On the other hand, two terms that are interchangeable and used throughout the book to represent this demographic group are the Love Jones Cohort and the Cohort (with a capital “C”). Likewise, never married, unmarried, single, and SALA are also interchangeably used to represent those who have never been married and are either living alone or with individuals they have no romantic connection with.

¹³ I am not using the term “cohort” in the demographic sense of a birth cohort, but simply as a group or band of individuals who have some characteristics in common.

¹⁴ The term “SALA” should be applied to Black groups. It can also be applied to other racial and ethnic groups that have been systematically disadvantaged – globally and in the USA – such as Indigenous and Latinx communities in America. I am also open to any group using the term SALA, as long as they are aware and actively fighting against racism in all of its forms.

In my previous quantitative work on the Love Jones Cohort (Dickson & Marsh, 2008; Marsh et al., 2007; Marsh & Iceland, 2010; Marsh & von Lockette, 2011; Marsh & Peña, 2020), I developed a Black Middle Class Index (BMCi) to measure class status. In this index, I define the Cohort as both Black women and men; aged 25 to 65; never married; no children; either living alone or with individuals they have no romantic connection with; with a professional occupation and a college or postsecondary graduate degree; with a household income at or above the median for Black households; and a homeowner (see Appendix B for additional information).

Should all these criteria be met, an individual receives the highest possible score of four, which is necessary to be considered part of the Love Jones Cohort. Any score lower than this disqualifies an individual from inclusion in the category. For example, a hypothetical young professional woman, whom we will name Aretha, makes over \$150,000 a year, holds a master's degree in Marketing, works at a marketing firm, and *leases* a pricey loft overlooking the Potomac River at the National Harbor in Prince George's County. According to the BMCi, Aretha would *not* classify as a member of the Love Jones Cohort. Despite her high income and affluent lifestyle, she has no reported assets such as a home, business, stocks, or retirement accounts. This decision is steeped in the previous Black middle-class literature. Scholars argue that lack of such wealth – a stock of assets owned at a particular time and/or resources inherited across generations – produces a fragility within the Black middle class (Oliver & Shapiro, 2013) and promotes a wealth disparity across the Black and white middle class (Addo & Darity, 2021; W. Darity Jr. et al., 2021).

The original data for the BMCi derive from the 1980, 1990, and 2000 U.S. Decennial Census. Subsequential data analysis stem from the 2010 and 2014 American Community Survey (ACS). The race variable was Black only, with mixed-race individuals excluded from the original quantitative dataset.¹⁵ The sex variable included only males and females.¹⁶

¹⁵ In my larger research agenda, I compare various household types in the Black middle class, such as married couples versus SALA. Given this, I focus on monoracial Black households for statistical comparisons, while acknowledging that the experiences of multiracial SALAs are as important as monoracial SALAs.

¹⁶ The Census has made progress in some areas but not in other ones. As I write this book, the U.S. Census Bureau is still investigating whether to include gender identity on future data collection (Holzberg et al., n.d.). While people have the option to identify a relationship as same sex, there are still no viable options for those who were gender nonbinary or gender nonconforming. www.census.gov/newsroom/press-kits/2020/2020-

The age variable ranged from those potentially entering the labor force (age 25) to those leaving, or preparing to leave, the labor force (age 65).¹⁷ In several of my quantitative publications, this broad age range has also been purposeful in capturing the narrower primary childbearing age for women as well as the preretirement age for both women and men.¹⁸ The never-married variable captured those who had never made the step from single to married.¹⁹ Similar to including both women and men in the sample, I made the intellectual decision that there is a substantive difference between those who have been exposed to marriage, even if it has ended due to separation, divorce, or death, versus those with no exposure. The living alone variable encompasses those who are not living with a romantic partner but may have a non-romantic housemate.²⁰

The Census Bureau divides households into two categories: family and nonfamily: “A nonfamily household consists of a householder living alone (a one-person household) or where the householder shares the home exclusively with people to whom he/she is not related” and “[a] family is a group of two people or more (one of whom is the householder) related by birth, marriage, or adoption and residing together; all such people (including related subfamily members) are considered as members of one family.”

At the national level, using the 2014 American Community Survey data to update my original BMCi, 13% of all Black middle-class households in 2014 were comprised of the Love Jones Cohort, a percentage that has increased every decade since 1980.²¹ Closer inspection of the Love Jones Cohort households reveals clear gender differences, with women making

census-lgbtq.html#:~:text=Every%2010%20years%2C%20the%20U.S.,a%20relationship%20as%20same%2Dsex.

¹⁷ In the national quantitative data, I was able to analyze data from those aged 25 to 65. In the qualitative data, even with heavy recruitment of those over the age of 55, the age range was limited to those aged 25 to 56. Those of any age can be members of the Love Jones Cohort.

¹⁸ In the quantitative data, I was able to determine if a child or children lived at home with an individual. I was not able to parse out whether they had children who were not present in the house. In the qualitative data, those who had children, living with them or not, were excluded.

¹⁹ Except for one female interviewee who married “really, really young” and the marriage ended shortly thereafter, they are included in the sample.

²⁰ My living alone classification aligns with the Census Bureau definition of a nonfamily in reference to a child or children: “a householder living alone (a one-person household) or sharing the home exclusively with people to whom he/she is *not* related by birth (child or children), marriage, or adoption and residing together” and diverges in reference to a housemate(s) – they can be related through birth (sibling or siblings).

²¹ The Love Jones Cohort was 6% of all Black middle-class households in 1990, 10% in 2000, and 13% in 2010.