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## The Need for an Updated Typology for Relationships in The Bahamas

Raymond Oenbring, Nicolette Bethel and William Fielding

In developing this issue, we have persistently been confronted with the thorny issue of language and labels, an issue that, in many ways, gets to the heart of the phenomenon of *sweethearting* itself. As elsewhere, there are myriad labels used for sexual relationships in The Bahamas, though most are not unique to our nation. The labels that participants, and scholars, use for relationships reflect assumptions, values, and worldviews, and these labels proved slippery in many cases. Sweethearting is, of course, a euphemism for relationships that many Bahamians see as devastating to their family life (see Anonymous, 2026). Nonetheless, as scholars, we have tried avoid moralistic terms such as adultery to describe extramarital relationships in this issue.

This question of naming of the practice Bahamians have dubbed sweethearting is neither new nor limited to The Bahamas. In fact, it has troubled academic studies of kinship relations in the Caribbean region for nearly a century. Anthropologists have long noted the anomalous family patterns across the region, documenting the existence of matrilocality—households and families cohering around a woman and her children—as a Caribbean family form linked to the pervasive practice of maintaining several long-term sexual and reproductive partnerships in various capacities.

Anthropologists suggested a range of terminologies to address the phenomenon. In the 1930s, Herskovits (1937) posited that it signified an element of African retention in the so-called new world, a connection also hypothesized by Hall-Campbell Dean and Culmer (2026). Herskovits categorised what we call sweethearting at our end of the Caribbean as a variant of the African practices of polygyny. Michael G. Smith, writing about Jamaica and Carriacou in the 1950s and 1960s, linked the phenomenon to what he called Caribbean plural societies: places in which different, often contradictory, cultural traditions coexist and interact. For him, the *visiting relationship* (his term for sweethearting) was a class-based exercise in which more powerful men maintained multiple households, often across classes. M. G. Smith's contemporary, Raymond Smith, suggested that it was linked to the precarious economic structures that arose in the wake of the plantation society (1956). In his model, based on his studies in Guyana, monogamy was not economically feasible for many families; hence the rise of multiple relationships as a strategic response to economic pressures.

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Taking up this perspective from the other side in the 1970s, Martinez-Alier (1974) suggested that in 19th-century Cuba, the role of women's agency was a significant component of the practice. She argued that women who occupied a less powerful position in society often used sexual and reproductive unions to consolidate their positions, leveraging their connections with the fathers of their children for economic and social advancement.

Most of the Caribbean scholars who study family and marriage prioritise economic and social structures in their considerations of what we call sweethearting. What is significant about this issue is the complexity and variation of the perspectives assembled. In this volume, considerations of sweethearting go beyond the economic and the structural, and touch on the personal, emotional and individual aspects as well.

In the Bahamian context, a prototypical sweethearting relationship involves a legally married person having a sexual relationship with another person, typically of the opposite sex (Grant, 1999). However, the term sweethearting can obscure variations in the nature of this relationship, its duration and if the relationship has resulted in children. However, with marriages occurring later, the possibility of single persons engaged in long-term relationships with only one person arise. This then can result in the expectation of the partners not engaging in other relationships. Should a partner have intimate relationships with another person, then the relationship could then start to look like a sweethearting relationship, even when the partners are unmarried.

In addition to longer-term relationships, some people participate in short-term relationships or in relationships of convenience, to cover a period when their usual partner is unavailable for sexual intercourse. One study (Rolle-Sands et al, 2026) a participant did not think that he had any partners as he only engaged in short-term sexual relationships. Such an attitude suggests that even the word *partner* in sexual partner, can be nuanced.

Hall Campbell-Dean and Culmer (2026) contend that sweethearting should be distinguished from *scheming*, as the former suggests an emotional involvement. Another distinctly Bahamian term for infidelity inside or outside marriage is *roaching*, a term that has less metaphorical analogues in Trinidad of *giving horn* and Guyana of *giving blow*.

Further, there is a Bahamian legal framework which defines words associated with actions within intimate partner relationships which may or may not align with what is understood; a key example of this is rape, which according to Bahamian law can only occur outside of a legal marriage (Sexual Offences Act, 1991). The close relationship between church and state in The Bahamas, articulated in official Government statements (BIS Bahamas, 2025), adds an overlay of expectations that intimate partner relationships should be governed by Christian ethics, which are not the same as codified law. This invites a moral lens to be used to view intimate partnerships, irrespective of the beliefs of the parties involved.

While it may be easy to cast the financial involvements of many sweethearting relationships as merely a transaction, where the male pays the female for sexual gratification, it is important to remember that even traditional monogamous relationships lead to financial involvement, and no one would dismiss marriage as merely transactional. Further, as some scholars note, the financial involvements of sexual relations can, ultimately, be a vehicle for females to empower—and enrich—themselves, at the male's expense (Sairsingh & Forbes, 2026).

All of this suggests that the traditional words associated with imitate partnerships in The Bahamas need to be reconsidered and augmented to reflect prevailing sexual relationships, irrespective of sexual orientation, so as to better reflect current sexual norms, and the attitudes of residents rather than those who represent secular or sacred authorities.

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