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Loving the Academy: Helping Educators Understand Characteristics of Black College Students' Romantic Relationships

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Title:

Loving the Academy: Helping Educators Understand Characteristics of Black College Students'
Romantic Relationships

Running head: CHARACTERISTICS OF BLACK STUDENTS' RELATIONSHIPS

By

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Abstract

The paper presents the results of a survey on the characteristics of black college students' romantic relationships, including types of relationships, the reasons for beginning and ending relationships and the elements of successful relationships. The anonymous electronic survey was voluntarily completed and included questions that allowed for both qualitative and quantitative assessment. The findings of the study reveal that students, who may be involved in stable and committed relationships, begin relationships for emotional needs and romance but acknowledge that compatible personality traits are the key to successful relationships. They cite cheating, partner abuse, and control as major causes of break-ups. The study suggests that colleges initiate systematic relationship education programs to help students develop healthy relationships and maximize learning.

Key Terms

Romantic relationships, relationship types, entering relationships, causes of breakups, control, cheating, abuse, stable / committed relationships, and successful relationships

Loving the Academy: Helping Educators Understand Characteristics of Black College Students' Romantic Relationships

Introduction

Positive romantic relationships are a good indicator of personal satisfaction and greater well-being (Kim, Greenberg, Seltzer, & Kraus, 2003). They, in turn contribute positively to personal and mental health (Braithwaite, Delevi, & Finchman, 2010). The converse is also true; negative intimate relationships are a predictor of poor health (Coker, Smith, Bethea, King, & McKeown, 2000; Roberts, Klein, & Fisher, 2003) in terms personal satisfaction and well-being. A large number of college students engage in unhealthy personal relationships, (Paul, McManus & Hayes 2000) which hinder them from attaining maximum educational success (Ohnishi et al. 2011). Similarly, Chng & Moore, 1994 found that college campuses are characterized by engagement in multiple casual sexual encounters. Further, research in the area shows that college students are routinely engaged in intimate personal relationships, and that these occupy a significant amount of their college time and effort (Steinberg, 2004, Wade, 2007). Anecdotal evidence suggests that some female students admit that their major goal in college is to get the proverbial “Mrs.” degree while male students say they plan to have as many sexual encounters as they can, (Paul, McManus & Hayes, 2000).

Given the importance of good personal and mental health to general well-being, educators are becoming increasingly more interested in and programs that address students' romantic relationships and academic failure. In as yet to be published research conducted by this

researcher at two different universities, preliminary results indicate that approximately 90% of the students surveyed reported that, since starting college, they had been involved in at least one intimate relationship and/or knew someone who also had,. Further, approximately 80% of the respondents reported that they had been involved in or knew someone who had been involved in an unhealthy romantic relationship. On the possible correlation between romantic relationships and academic performance, 100% of the 257 respondent students said that they believed that positive relationships had a positive effect on their academic performance. If we accept that premise that one major purpose of higher education is to educate students for productive societal membership and that academic success is the key requirement for graduation, then, we can posit that understanding key characteristics of students' romantic relationships ought to be one of the important goals for college educators and campus leaders.

Problem

College students are becoming more diverse in a variety of areas, including age and type of academic path pursued. The US Department of Education (2011) reports that between 2000 and 2009, the percentage increase of students over the age of 25 (non-traditional students) has been 18 percentage points greater than that of the (traditional) 18-24 age group. Especially given the difficult economic times that the nation has been facing in the last few years, many adults have found it necessary to go themselves going back to try and gain new skills for the purpose of improving their competitiveness and employability. At the time of the survey, national unemployment levels were averaging 9.7% (United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Statistics, 2011), while they were at 10.9% in the South Atlantic region in February of 2010 (United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). At the college of study, continuing education students make up about sixteen percent of the undergraduate population.

Consequently, is important to include adult students in studies such as this one that examines romantic relationships, a topic that affects college students across diverse demographics, including age.

Traditional college students still remain the majority populations on most residential four-year college campuses. These students are experiencing some of the most challenging maturation stages in human growth and development--teenage to early post-adolescence and young adulthood. Educators are continually seeking to understand what really goes on at this crucial stage, one that is partially characterized by the tensions between the free-spiritedness of youth and the responsibilities of adulthood necessary for college and relationship success. Hormones are raging even before students graduate from high school, making intimate relationships a central aspect of their lives, (Vera & Betz, 1992). In 2009, 62.3% of twelfth graders admitted having had sexual intercourse, with the highest number (72.1%) being that of black males, (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010). Recent studies indicate that the brain is still changing even after age 18, suggesting that maturity only sets in during a person's mid-twenties; long after a significant number of traditional students have experienced multiple intimate relationships, gotten married, or even had offspring themselves. More worrisome is the fact that about 20% of female high school students report that they have been physically abused and/or sexually abused by a dating partner (Bennett & Baird, 2005). A study by Forke, Myers, Catallozzi, and Schwarz (2008) found that college students experience more intimate partner violence than other forms of violence, with sexual, physical, and emotional violence being prevalent. The physical, cognitive, emotional, and social challenges experienced by traditional age students as they enter college campuses can be overwhelming, especially if colleges do not innovatively increase efforts to support students in more comprehensive ways.

Black students, the majority of those attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), appear to face unique relationship challenges that are rooted in historical, political, regional, racial, and cultural milieus; such factors may differentiate their experiences from those of majority white students. For example, a critical historical review of the politics and laws relating to slavery, racism, sex, gender, marriage, and power may uncover some of the historical legacies that may have shaped different relationship experiences. Critical feminist analyses reveal patterns of institutionalized, racialized and gendered sexual oppression that negatively affected enslaved black women in the southern states of the US south (Davis, 2002; Davis, 1998; James, Foster, & Guy Sheftall, 2009). Additionally, researchers posit that due to the deep entrenchment of the exploitation, resultant cultural, psychological, sociological consequences transcended the enslaved females to impact upon black communities as a whole, (Clark Hine, 1994; Painter, 1994). Moreover, national statistics often show that black students report the highest percentages of having had sexual intercourse. For example, in 2011, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2012) found reported that the national average of 15,425 high school students who had had sexual intercourse was 47.4.0%, while it was 66.9% among black students. Thus, the specific characteristics of African American college students' intimate relationships ought to be investigated, in an effort to increase understanding thereof. Yet, to our knowledge, most of the research on romantic relationships available until this study was performed was conducted on students at predominantly white institutions. Similarly, most of the research, like related student- affairs based programs, has concentrated only on traditional age students, leaving adult continuing education students out of the discussion.

Overview of study

In an effort to increase the general understanding of the nature of intimate relationships in which black students engage, this study examines the results of survey data gathered from 104 undergraduate students enrolled at a historically Black university in the southeast. This study sought to find out the relationship statuses, types of relationships, reasons for entering relationships, major causes of relationship breakups, and students' perceptions of the elements required for relationships to succeed.

Methods

The survey used in this study was completed by 104 traditional and continuing education undergraduate students enrolled at a historically Black college in the southeastern United States. The survey link and request were distributed via electronic mail by faculty members teaching mostly English and Gender Studies classes. The survey, which had an 80% response rate, was strictly voluntary and anonymous; it was not tied to any requirement or extra class credit. It was completed online, via the SurveyMonkey website; the results were exported, cleaned, and compiled into files used for analysis. The survey consisted of closed and open-ended questions that produced both quantitative and qualitative responses to allow for a deeper understanding of the students' relationships.

While 104 respondents participated in the survey, the actual numbers completing each question varied. For the demographic questions, respondents were free to skip any questions they did not want to answer. In the core research questions, the variation is largely based on the skip logic pattern that the SurveyMonkey software allows in the survey design process. An online tutorial is available on the SurveyMonkey website that describes skip logic in detail (see http://help.surveymonkey.com/app/tutorials/detail/a_id/430). The skip logic pattern allows the researcher to create a 'filter question' that is used to guide a subset of respondents through a set

of applicable follow-up questions. This might involve skipping questions that are not applicable to the subset, thus leading different respondents through different paths. This helps to individualize the surveys to each participant, without requiring the creation of different surveys for each subset.

In the current survey, for instance, one of the filter questions asked respondents if they were currently involved in a romantic relationship. Those who selected “Yes” were then led to questions that asked them to provide more details about the number and types of current relationships. On the other hand, those respondents who answered “No” were directed to a different set of questions that asked them to provide information about the last time they were involved in relationships, for example. Both the Yes and the No groups skipped questions that were not applicable to them, without even realizing the existence of those questions. Therefore, the numbers of responses presented in the findings will varied accordingly.

The core survey questions used in this study focused on the relationship status and type, reasons for entering into relationships, common causes of breakups, and perceived relationship success factors. The questions were presented in both open-ended and closed menu option formats. The open-ended responses produced a wide range of qualitative data, which were then coded and combined into thematic categories to facilitate analysis and observe larger data trends. The summary data presented in this paper are intended to increase understanding of how the respondent students experience and perceive romantic relationships. The results pertain to questions that relate to the relationship status and type, reasons for entering into relationships, most common causes of relationship breakups, and perceptions on elements that make relationships successful.

Summary Data

Demographics. The section below provides an overview of the demographics of survey respondents; it is intended to give the reader a snapshot of the people who provided information for this study. Respondents were asked open-ended demographic questions to allow for self-definition and to avoid the tendency to essentialize research participants into predetermined categories. Gathering the open-ended data was even more essential with questions that elicited information about the socially-constructed categories of human classification, especially those of gender, race, and sexual preference. The characterizations and definitions of these categories are dynamic, personal, political, varied, and continually in flux. For a discussion on the social construction of such categories, (see, e.g. Weber 2010; hooks 1981; Collins 2009; Chitiga 2008; Davis 2002; Davis 1983; James, Foster, & Guy Sheftall 2009.). Such open-ended questions helped the study obtain as authentic a set of responses as possible.

The general demographic information collected included that of gender, race, and sexual preference of the respondents. Of the 104 black respondents, females constituted nearly 87.5% of the respondents to the survey; this in part reflects the enrollment pattern at the university, where female students constitute approximately 70% of the student population. They were all undergraduate college students, including traditional and continuing education adult learners enrolled at a small, private HBCU. Participants were asked to identify their race using their own terminology instead of choosing from a list of options. This was intended to allow them to self-define without being restricted to set categories. The respondents used either or both 'black/African American to specify their race. Similarly, this paper uses the terms black and African American interchangeably to more accurately reflect the self-naming patterns used by participants.

Respondents were also asked to state their sexual preference; 94.2% of them responded to this question. Due to the sensitive nature of this topic, especially in the southeast United States, it is possible that despite the assurance of anonymity and confidentiality given, some did not feel comfortable about revealing their sexual preference. Eight percent of those who provided a response to the question indicated that they were either homosexual or bisexual. This percentage is slightly higher than various estimates of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) population in the United States, which range from 1.5% generated by various public surveys to over 4% cited by government departments (Cray, Leff, & Tang 2011).

Limitations of the Study

There are a number of limitations that restrict the usefulness of these data in creating predictive models. The study is based on self-reported responses, which, while they provide information about how the students perceive their relationship, may have the usual limitations related to the levels of truthfulness, and objectivity. To minimize this effect, the survey was anonymous and assured the participants of confidentiality and the fact that the results would be compiled together and presented as a summary, without using any individual identifiers. In their study, Meston, Heiman, Trapnell, and Paulhus (1998) found anonymity to be an effective factor in reducing social desirability biases. Another limitation with providing statistics is related to the distribution of responses and the variation (or lack thereof) in responses, given the relative similarities of the respondents' demographics, i.e. college students at a small historically Black university in a southeastern US state., Further, the survey was distributed to a small convenience sample. This study is meant to provide insights into the characteristics of the romantic relationships in which students attending historically Black colleges engage.

Discussion of Findings

This section presents and discusses the key findings of the study in summary tables.

Tables 1-4 present the summary data for the four questions that are at the heart of this research:

- What type of romantic relationship is the primary/most significant one? (Question 1)
- What are your most common reasons for entering into a relationship? (Question 2)
- What were the major reasons for your relationship breakups? (Question 3)
- What do you think makes a relationship successful? (Question 4)

Whereas questions 1 and 3 offered respondents drop-down menus of several choices from which to select their responses, questions 2, and 4 were open-ended and yielded a variety of qualitative responses that were expressed in the respondents' own words. Because of the variety of responses for all four questions, they were grouped into thematic categories to facilitate analysis.

Question 1: Types of Most Significant Relationships

Using the skip question logic, respondents who indicated that they were currently involved in a romantic relationship were directed to a question that asked them to indicate what type of romantic relationship they considered the most significant one. 86.2% of respondents in this subset (see Table 1) selected committed or stable relationships as their most primary ones. Committed relationships included engagements and marriages, while monogamous ones were classified as stable. Casual relationships, which included one-night stands, on and off dating, open, and friends with benefits accounted for only 7% of the respondents' most significant relationship responses.

Table 1

Responses to Question 1: What type of romantic relationship is the primary/most significant one?

Choice	Number	Percent of Total Respondents
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Casual	7	12.1%
Committed	30	51.7%
Stable	20	34.5%
Other	1	1.7%
Total:	58	100%

Question 2: Most Common Reasons for Entering a Romantic Relationship

Table 2 presents the data collected for the respondents' most common reasons for entering into a relationship. These responses were also largely grouped into two categories, with 76.9% of respondents indicating that emotional needs and love/romance were the most common reasons for entering relationships. Respondents indicated that some of the emotional needs met through relationships were companionship, friendship, overcoming loneliness, compassion, and happiness. Love and romance were also important in this category, as was the desire for affection was also included in this category. The commitment category included terms such as marriage, stability, and the desire for children, which totaled eight responses in the survey. The personality traits category included respect, honesty, sense of humor, trust, and compatibility.

Table 2

Responses to Question 2: What are your most common reasons for entering into a relationship?

Category	Number	Percent of Total Respondents
Personal gratification	1	1.1%
Emotional needs	35	38.0%
Commitment	8	8.7%
Personality traits	3	3.3%

Love/romance	45	48.9%
Total	92	100%

Question 3: Major Reasons for the Breakups of Past Relationships

In an effort to find out what participants experienced and what they perceived to be the major causes for breakups in their past relationships, the survey asked: “What were the major reasons for your relationship breakups?” The survey used the term ‘breakup’, a more neutral descriptive term, rather than relationship failure, a somewhat value-laden term that might be interpreted as implying judgment on the relationship competency of the participants. This attempt to neutralize the description reflects a way of thinking about the complexities of relationships, as challenging journeys that do not always have an explicit roadmap that can be judiciously followed by both parties. The choice also reflects another aspect of thinking, that the length of a relationship is not a reliable indicator of the relationship’s health or success. On the contrary, the duration of some relationships is prolonged much against the will of at least one member of the partnership, for reasons that include, but are not limited to the following: control, intimidation, abuse, social stigma, financial constraints, employment concerns, relocation concerns, familial concerns, the ‘good’ of the children’, (albeit sometimes quite misguided). Therefore, relationship success is quite different from relationship longevity or survival; hence this study’s decision to use the term “breakups” for this question.

Table 3 presents summaries of respondents’ main reasons for ending their most significant relationship. Cheating was the most frequently reported cause of breakups (43.2%), while abuse/violence/control comprised 35.2% of the reasons. Family interference was reported as the third most common cause of breakups (17%). General abuse, which included the former

partner's abuse of addictive substances such as alcohol, illegal drugs, or medications, constituted 12.5% of the overall reasons for breakups.

Table 3

Responses to Question 3: What were the major reasons for your relationship breakups?

Choice	Number	Percent of Total Respondents
Divorce	4	4.5%
Cheating	38	43.2%
Abuse/Violence/Control	20	22.7%
Abuse (General)	11	12.5%
Family Interference/Resentment	15	17.0%
Total	88	100%

Question 4: Key Elements of Successful Relationships.

Table 4 includes the coded and categorized qualitative responses for question 4. The categories are the same ones used to group responses in Table 2 that listed reasons for entering into relationships. In an interesting contrast to the results in Table 2, 62.5% of respondents indicated that personality traits were important to successful relationships compared to only 3.3% indicating that personality traits were a reason for entering a relationship. Similarly, when compared with the data presented in Table 2, responses indicate that while respondents enter relationships primarily to fulfill emotional needs, and to find love or romance, these may not be significant elements of successful relationships.

Table 4. Responses to Question 4: What do you think makes a relationship successful?

Category	Number	Percent of Total Respondents
Personal gratification	4	5.6%
Emotional needs	12	16.7%
Commitment	3	4.2%
Personality traits	45	62.5%
Love/romance	6	8.3%
Total	72	100%

Implications for Further Research

This study highlights several areas that need further research to increase our understanding of the nature of the relationships that college students experience. Given the limitation of the sample, both in size and in demographics, a larger study involving a variety of universities could help deepen our insights. Some studies could be focused on different student populations in different higher education institution types, while others may involve a cross section of the variety of college types we have. Secondly, a larger sample is more likely to help us understand whether and to what extent the specific variables are actually (independently) correlated. Additional demographic information, including age, college classification, familial relationship history and experiences, and religious beliefs and practices might produce more informative independent variables to the analyses. Larger studies could utilize random sampling and more quantitative methods, in an effort to enhance their predictive ability. Similarly, other studies could utilize more ethnographic methods that provide rich, thick descriptions on the topic.

A follow-up to the current study looks at how students perceive the roles of their relationships in helping or hindering their academic success. The preliminary results of the study indicate that students believe that there is a correlation between healthy relationships and good academic performance. The findings from such studies could help bring student development and academic affairs staff together to share strategies for helping students enhance their relationships in ways that can help develop the total student, improve well-being and possibly enhance their chances of academic success. Such collaborations can help bridge the superficial gaps that exist between these two units, which often operate in silos, despite the fact that they are both working for the very same group of students. The situation on the ground sometimes suggests that these two divisions are working on discrete elements of the same students, instead of working in unison to develop the total student!

Conclusions

The findings of the study reveal that students are predominantly involved in stable and committed relationships; that they enter into relationships for love and emotional needs; they report that cheating and intimate partner abuse, violence, and control are the major causes of their relationship breakups. Students enter into relationships for love/romance and emotional needs, yet the majority of participants believe that compatible personality traits are the key elements of successful relationships. Finally, the study suggests that colleges ought to engage in more structured relationship education, given the pivotal role of relationships in the lives and academic well-being of students. Finally, this study recommends further and more expansive quantitative and qualitative research.

The results indicate that the study participants are largely involved in stable and committed relationships. This sharply contrasts the popular notions advanced by the media that

students prefer and engage mostly in “hook-ups” (CNN 2011). It is possible that most of the research that is used in the media is conducted on predominantly white institutions and not on predominantly black colleges. Nevertheless, there is some research that has also found that students of color were less likely to engage in hookups than Caucasian students (Owen, Rhoades, Stanley, & Fincham, 2010; Paul, McManus & Hayes, 2000; Chng and Moore, 1994). Similarly, Paul, McManus & Hayes (2000) found anecdotal evidence suggesting that “hooking up is thought of by African American college students as a step in the development of a romantic relationship rather than as a discrete sexual experience,” (p. 86). Such behavior might help explain the prevalence of stable and committed relationships among the students in the study. This might indicate that there are racial and cultural differences in dating patterns that would be important to explore in order to gain a fuller understanding of students’ lives.

This study indicates that cheating is the most common cause of relationship breakups, while intimate partner abuse is reported as the second major cause of relationship breakups among college students. The latter seems to support the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (1997) finding that 20.4% of traditional female college students reported having been forced to have sexual intercourse. The need to control the actions of intimate partners is generally higher than the need to control the actions of those outside such arrangements. The need to exert control over partners is the most recognized root of domestic violence (National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence). Control is so central to abuse that most definitions of abuse include the word “control.” For example, Stanford University (2012) characterizes relationship abuse as “a pattern of abusive and coercive behaviors used to maintain power and control over a former or current intimate partner.” Therefore, educators may want to investigate

the relationship types in which their students engage to find out if there are any correlations between relationship type and intimate partner violence.

The study also indicates that while a large majority of students think that personality traits are key to relationship success, they do not consider these when they enter into romantic relationships. Instead, they get involved in romantic relationships for love/romance and emotional needs. This paradox might help explain why so many people find themselves in unsatisfactory, unhealthy, and abusive relationships, especially given that traditional female college students are at the highest risk of suffering non-fatal intimate partner violence (Domestic violence statistics, 2011). College professionals might want to investigate this contradiction in more depth so that they help close the knowledge and practice gaps that seem to exist in this area. Perhaps a series of structured training classes in the development and maintenance of healthy relationships might help students become more analytical of their own relationship behaviors, as well as help peer-educate their college mates.

College campuses could conduct more investigative studies to find out possible knowledge gaps that may hinder students from identifying the early warning signs of unhealthy relationship behaviors. Campus leaders and educators could use such research findings to enhance their educational offerings to help students become more pro-active so they can diligently look out for, recognize, and minimize the occurrence of subtle signs and symptoms of cheating, relationship abuse, general abuse, including illegal drug use, and other destructive behaviors.

Finally, because positive relationships are a good indicator of academic success, post secondary institutions have high stakes in enhancing provisions that help students maximize educational attainment; these include, but are not limited to, offering highly effective training

activities in relationship development and maintenance. Such efforts could be coupled with strong institutional support for faculty research and service involvement in this somewhat neglected, yet pivotal area of student development, academic enhancement, and retention.

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