The Black Gender Gap: A Commentary on Intimacy and Identity Issues of Black College Women

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The purpose of this article is to assist mental health counselors and student affairs practitioners to gain a better understanding of the challenges 21st century Black college women may face in their attempt to develop intimate heterosexual relationships with Black men. Consequently, higher education leaders have the opportunity to support Black women in their quest to establish a healthy identity by providing educational opportunities within co-curricular and academic contexts to meet the needs of this unique population of students. The implementation of culturally relevant interactive workshops, case studies, and conversations focused on the positive contributions and value of Black women may aid them as they wrestle with relationship issues during the crucial process of developing a salubrious evolving identity. It is imperative that college counselors and student affairs professionals strive to augment appropriate multicultural awareness, knowledge and skills necessary to effectively assist Black women grappling with relationship issues as they move through the process of identity development.

Keywords: Black women, intimate relationships, heterosexual relationships, Black men, identity development

Most students choose to attend college in order to earn an academic degree, while others view the experience as an opportunity to identify a potential spouse for starting a family (Pew Research Center, 2010). Unfortunately, many 21st century Black college women face a myriad of problems when seeking a compatible mate. Some of the challenges these women encounter when attempting to develop intimate heterosexual relationships with Black men relate to the gender gap (i.e., gender ratio imbalance) that exists between Black women and Black men in college (Cuyjet, 2006). Because of this disparity, Black women grapple with issues such as the quest for a male partner with equal educational status, sexually related health risks, conflicts with interracial dating, and questions concerning dating significantly younger or older men (Henry, 2008). These types of issues can be quite daunting for young Black college women born into oppressive societal conditions and stigmatized with the burden of racism, sexism, and classism (Henry, Butler, & West, 2012). Unfortunately, these women may have little or no knowledge regarding the circumstances of their devalued status, nor the appropriate coping skills to survive the negative effects of their devaluation (Henry, 2008). Thus, some Black women may make poor dating decisions that lead to low self-esteem, negative self-efficacy, dysfunctional intimate relationships, academic failure, and an overall unhealthy identity, as well as lifelong physical and psychological health challenges (Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003).

Women from other cultural groups also may face some of the same types of concerns and issues as Black women in the process of finding a mate; however, Black women in college are particularly challenged in the process of finding a mate because they have endured a long history of racism, sexism, and classism. This situation has perpetuated the educational gender gap, and strained intimate relationships between Black men and women. In fact, some researchers contend that the stress that exists in "Black love" relationships is

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primarily because of political, social, and economic oppression in America (Alexander-Floyd & Simien, 2006; Hill, 2005; hooks, 2001; Waters & Conaway, 2007). Thus, it is important to consider these phenomena when discussing Black love relationships among college students, because of their salient and intersecting influences on the identity development of Black men and women in this country. This article explores issues young Black college women face when seeking long-term intimate relationships with Black men during their college years.

Theoretical Framework

Identity development is a complex phenomenon because of both internal and external factors in the lives of individuals. According to Chickering and Reisser (1993), the college years are a critical time when young adults not only struggle with newfound freedom, but also must navigate the developmental trajectories of identity formation. The concept of identity has been defined as a set of qualities and/or characteristics that express who and what an individual is and desires to become (Cross, 1971). Schuh, Jones, Harper, and Associates (2011) described identity as a foundation from which a person's image of self is derived.

Researchers studying women's identity development have emphasized the significance of establishing intimacy and interpersonal relationships in the process of identity formation (Blackhurst, 1995; Chickering, 1969; Josselson, 1987, 1996; Taub & McEwen, 1991). Additionally, studies investigating intimate relationships between Black women and Black men have called attention to the effects of race, gender, and social class as constructs that influence their intimate interactions (Hill, 2005; hooks, 2001; Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Inasmuch as the interplay of these constructs intertwines to influence identity development, it could be surmised that the dating decisions of Black women are influenced in part by their experiences at particular stages of racial and gender identity formation (Henry, 2008).

Racial Identity Development

Cross' (1971) Black identity development model has been widely used as a framework to help contextualize the process of racial identity formation (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). Cross contends that as Blacks move toward the development of a sound racial identity, they must reframe their sense of self from perspectives rooted in the dominant White culture to attitudes and beliefs based on their own Black cultural standpoint (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). This is anchored in a series of racial identity stages: *pre-encounter*, *encounter*, *immersion-emersion*, and *internalization* (Cross, 1971). Thus, it seems that the dating decisions of Black women and men are influenced by their worldview at a certain stage of racial identity formation (Henry, 2008).

Womanist Identity Development

Janet Helms' (1990) womanist identity development theory has been widely used in discussing the concerns and issues regarding women of color (Johnson, 2003). Helms' model describes the process of identity formation according to the experiences of women as they move from an external, societal definition of womanhood to an internal, personally salient definition of womanhood. Helms' theory parallels that of Cross' (1971) Black identity development model and suggests that women move through the same four developmental stages that Cross proposed.

During the *pre-encounter* stage, women conform to societal views about gender and tend to display characteristics of gendered stereotypes (Helms, 1990). In the second stage, *encounter*, as a result of new information and experiences, the woman begins to question accepted values and beliefs (Helms). It is during this stage that a heightened sense of womanhood is developed. The *immersion-emersion* stage involves the idealization of women and the rejection of male-supremacist views of women in order to find a positive self-

affirmation of womanhood (Helms). At the fourth and final stage, *internalization*, a positive definition of womanhood has emerged, which is based upon the woman's own beliefs and values; the shared experiences of other women are valued as a source of information concerning the role of women, and there is conscious rejection of external definitions of womanhood (Helms, 1995).

The process of identity development among Black college women may significantly impact their dating decisions. For example, a woman in the pre-encounter stage may make very different dating decisions than a woman in the internalization stage. Within this context, the discussion that follows details the many challenges Black women face during their quest to date as they progress through college.

Many 21st century Black college women that are interested in finding a Black mate of similar academic status are not optimistic about their future for dating, marriage, and family (Henry, 2008). A review of relevant literature reveals several challenges that influence the dating decisions of Black women in college.

The Black Educational Gender Gap
While the total enrollment of minorities has been increasing, there are twice as many Black women attending college as men ("Census," 2005). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2007), females are enrolled in undergraduate institutions at higher rates than males across all racial and ethnic groups; however, the gender gap is largest among Blacks. A study conducted by the American Council on Education on the status of low-income minority students in higher education revealed that "among all ethnic groups except African Americans, as income increased the gender gap disappeared" (Bronstein, 2000, p. 4a). The *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* ("Black women students," 2006) noted that Black females make up 64% of the Black undergraduate student population on college and university campuses across the country. This trend is expected to continue as Black females are predicted to increase their college enrollment at a higher rate than Black males (Marklein, 2005; National Center for Education Statistics, 2007; Zamani, 2003). Unfortunately the campus dating scene for Black college students is grossly unbalanced (Cuyjet, 2006) and is projected to worsen.

As a result of the gender disparity on contemporary college campuses, Black women who aspire to find compatible, college-educated Black males are experiencing greater difficulty than women from other racial and ethnic groups (Offner, 2002). Black women generally outnumber Black men 60% to 40% on college campuses around the country (Foston, 2004). Even women that enroll at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) with hopes of being in an environment where there are many Black college men do not find that their luck is any better (Henderson, 2006). According to Foston (2004) at Smith University, a small HBCU in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 2004 the enrollment of Black students was approximately 58% women and 42% men. At Florida A&M University in Tallahassee, Florida, the Black enrollment was approximately 58.5% women and 41.5% men. HBCUs with a higher ratio between women and men included Clark Atlanta University and Fisk University, both with a ratio of 70% women to 30% men (Foston, 2004). Similarly, Broussard (2006) purported that a significant percentage (39%) of Black college women would be left without a college-educated male partner if all the Black men in college were in a committed relationship with a Black woman. This suggests that many young, Black, college-educated women have a low probability of dating and marrying Black men of equal educational status (Furstenburg, 2001).

Reasons for the Black educational gender gap. A variety of factors related to race and socioeconomic status have been cited to explain why there are fewer Black men in college than Black women (Bronstein, 2000). Some of these factors include societal stigmatization and stereotyping, which often result in the disproportionate tracking of Black males in early grade school (Blake & Darling, 1994); under preparedness among many Black males that manage to graduate from high school (Townsend Walker, 2012); and high rates of violent deaths and incarceration among Black men (Swanson, Cunningham, & Spencer, 2003).

Ballard (2002) contends that Black males have been discouraged from earning a college degree by negative experiences they may have encountered in secondary school. For example, the disproportionate educational tracking (grouping students according to their academic abilities in classes categorized as approaching basic, honors or college prep) of Black males in elementary school has negatively affected their self-concept as well as their current and future achievement (Blake & Darling, 1994; Townsend Walker, 2012). In essence, because of educational tracking and the widespread underlying assumption that Black males cannot achieve academically, many of them graduate from high school lacking the academic skills, motivation or desire to pursue higher education. Additionally, as Murphy (2004) noted, "in the 15–30 age bracket, Black men have a mortality rate that is twice that of Black women" (p. 125). He attributes this to the fact that homicide and suicide are among the top three causes of death among Black men and that half a million of them are incarcerated. Hence, the large number of Black males who are not college bound directly contributes to the gender ratio imbalance that reduces the dating options of Black women in college and influences their dating decisions.

The Quest for Equal Status Among Mates

Black college women prefer to date men who are similar to them in education, occupation and social status (Henry, 2008). Consistent with the increasing number of women that are earning college degrees, more Black women are earning higher salaries than some of their Black male counterparts ("Census," 2005), which makes it even more difficult to find a Black male partner of equal education, economic or social status (Furstenburg, 2001). Consequently, some 21st century Black women choose to remain single or postpone marriage until they can find a suitable Black male partner (Cuyjet, 2006; Henderson, 2006; Kitwana, 2002; Porter & Bronzaft, 1995). This dating decision may create undue stress for the Black woman due to family pressures and societal expectations regarding the importance of marriage (Henry, 2008). In addition, women who remain single may be left to contend with the negative characterizations of unmarried women in our society (e.g., old maid, spinster).

Sexually Related Health Risks

Many Black college women attempt to secure a long-term relationship with Black men by participating in promiscuous, risky sexual behavior (Foreman, 2003). Some of these behaviors include men having multiple female sex partners and women complying with men's desire not to use a condom during sexual intercourse, which have increased the risk of HIV/AIDS among women and men on college campuses (Foreman). In fact, some students at HBCUs attribute the increasing number of Black women in college infected with HIV/AIDS to the gender ratio imbalance (Ferguson, Quinn, Eng, & Sandelowski, 2006).

The literature cautions Black women in particular to be aware of various reproductive health issues that exist within their cultural group (Ferguson et al., 2006). For example, during 2005, 66% of 9,708 Black women ages 15–39 were diagnosed with HIV/AIDS (Centers for Disease Control, 2007); in fact, HIV/AIDS has been reported as the number one cause of death among Black women ages 25–34 (Bullock, 2003). The rate of chlamydia among Black females is seven times higher than that among White females, and the rate of gonorrhea in Black women is nearly 20 times greater than that among White women (Jones, 2005).

Interracial Dating

Another way some Black women choose to address the gender ratio imbalance issue is to date and marry interracially. Because of the lack of college-educated Black males, Black females are dating outside of their race more than ever before (Hughes, 2003). Some Black women in interracial relationships have indicated that they were initially attracted to their White spouses because they could not find a Black mate of comparable social status and income level (Stanley, 2011). A study conducted by Knox, Zusman, Buffington, and Hemphill (2000) regarding the interracial dating attitudes among college students revealed that Blacks were twice as likely as Whites to report openness to involvement in an interracial relationship.

Much of the research regarding Black women's dating preferences indicates that many do not desire to date outside of their race (Stanley, 2011). Black women who have observed immediate family members in devoted, long-lasting relationships seek that same type of commitment in relationships from men within their own race (Williams, 2006). It may be that these women wish to preserve their culture by producing a future generation of Black children. Thus, they hold firmly to the ideal of dating or marrying within their own race. Some Black women choose not to date interracially due to fear of opposition from their own family members, the family members of their racially dissimilar partner, and the Black community. Historically, there is a societal expectation that Black women should choose mates within their own racial group. These types of interpersonal challenges tend to create a great deal of stress in interracial relationships (Ortega, 2002).

Black men seem to be a bit more comfortable in crossing the color lines than Black women when it comes to dating and marriage. Banks and Gatlin (2005) reported that 13% of Black men are in interracial marriages, and census data revealed that 73% of all Black/White marriages are Black men with White women (Pew Research Center, 2006). As a result, Black women often find themselves competing for the attention of Black men who are already a limited pool of suitable mates. When Black men choose to date interracially, Black women are left feeling inadequate, particularly about their appearance (Stanley, 2011). Constant feelings of inadequacy may lead some Black females to adopt uncharacteristic behaviors, such as remaining in physically or emotionally abusive relationships with Black men.

Dating Younger Men

With the diminishing choices of mates for Black women in college, some have chosen to date much younger men (Henry, 2008). This phenomenon was first introduced into popular culture by Terri McMillan's (1996) book *How Stella Got Her Groove Back,* which depicted McMillan's real-life love encounter with a younger man while vacationing in Jamaica. McMillan's plot has become a reality for many Black women. Several women who were asked to share their views on dating in an *Ebony* magazine article stated that they preferred to date younger men because these men were more vibrant ("The Stella thing," 1998.) The article also indicated that because many Black men are incarcerated, married, gay, or dating interracially, Black women do not have many options; therefore, dating younger men has become an attractive alternative. It appears that some Black women are dispelling the notion that marrying an older Black man equates to social status, financial security and marital bliss. Similarly, Gilbert (2003) contends that many older women and younger men relationships among African American couples seem to work out well, with the most important factor in these relationships not being age, but rather compatibility. Many Black women in college who decide to engage in a love relationship with a younger man may endure potential hostility from family members, friends and the Black community in general.

Discussion

Dating for Black college women not only creates challenges in terms of finding a compatible Black mate, but also in finding and accepting one's true self. Because of the educational gender gap, many Black women in college who are seeking long-term relationships with Black men believe that they must cater to the whims and wishes of men. According to Helms' (1990) womanist identity development theory, young Black women in college who have not yet developed a healthy, internally based, positive definition of womanhood may make detrimental dating decisions. However, women who have progressed to the final stage of Helms' model, *internalization*, may make better dating decisions, which are grounded in a positive self-identity. These women may have the courage to remain single, abstain from risky sexual behavior, date interracially, or date younger Black men. If Black women are supported in forming a positive self-concept, they may avoid making poor

decisions as they seek intimacy in hopes of dating, marrying, and having a family; thus they will be less likely to experience poor long-term psychological and physical health.

Implications for Mental Health Counselors

Mental health professionals on college campuses are uniquely positioned to assist Black women in achieving a positive mature identity regardless of the challenges they may face in attempting to establish long-term intimate relationships with Black men. It is important for mental health counselors to be knowledgeable about the concerns, issues and needs of this unique population (Constantine & Greer, 2003). Although many Black women experience difficulties in adjusting to or dealing with college life, Constantine and Greer noted that they seek counseling for issues related to their personal dating dilemmas more often than is expected. In an article by Gabriel (2010), relationship concerns were listed as one of the most reported issues presented by ethnic minority counseling center clients on college campuses. This suggests that college counselors need the awareness, knowledge and skills necessary to effectively assist Black women grappling with relationship issues.

By studying and applying identity development models that illuminate the various stages of development that Black women encounter, counselors may begin to understand the dating struggles experienced by Black college women. For example, it is important for counselors to be aware of Cross' (1971) Black identity development model and Helms' (1990) womanist identity development theory, respectively, and to understand how race and gender oppression may influence Black college women's ability to move successfully toward a positive and healthy self-identity. Clearly, an individual with a salubrious self-concept would be more likely to make good dating decisions.

Based on Cross' (1971) identity development model, counselors may encounter a Black college woman who passed through the *immersion* stage and is in the process of *emersion,* taking on characteristics and behaviors of another race. Here it is critical for counselors to understand that the woman may be in denial as the *emersion* characteristics are antithetical to what the woman feels are appropriate behaviors for her race. Using Helms' (1990) womanist identity theory, a Black college woman may be in search of a positive self-affirming definition of womanhood. Here it is critical for the counselor to understand the stage the client is in to support her appropriately.

Counselors must not only adopt a culturally relevant framework, but also must be aware of culturally appropriate counseling techniques in order to better serve Black college women (Bradley & Sanders Lipford, 2003). Chief among the strategies to assist Black women in achieving a healthy self-concept is a need for women-centered networks of emotional support (Williams, 2005) that provide Black women with "a place to describe their experiences among persons like themselves" (Howard-Hamilton, 2003, p. 25). According to Helms' (1990) model, Black college women may use these encounters with other Black women to identify, question and reject the pervasive negative stereotypes that influence their self-concept. Group interventions such as "sistercircles" often provide Black college women with powerful support networks (Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003, p. 101) that may assist them in making healthier dating decisions. These circles involve sharing experiences and discussing coping strategies and may be especially useful on predominantly White campuses, where the issues of Black women tend to be overlooked or marginalized at the periphery of campus life.

Implications for Student Affairs Professionals

Student affairs professionals who are well versed in student development theory also are uniquely positioned to assist Black college women in establishing healthy identities as they search for opportunities to engage in intimate dating relationships with Black college men. By providing Black college women with challenging, yet supportive educational opportunities within a variety of co-curricular and academic contexts, student affairs professionals can assist these women in reaping the psychosocial benefits of being involved in healthy

intimate relationships and help them develop a positive sense of self. For example, interactive workshops, case studies, and conversations centered on the contributions and values of Black women may aid in positive identity development among young Black women in college. Based upon Helms' (1990) womanist identity development model, the ability of these women to form positive identities may strengthen their self-concept and thus enhance the probability of them engaging in healthy intimate relationships.

In addition, student affairs programming should be structured to challenge (and support) Black college women to confront the wide array of "microaggressive" indignities (i.e., racist and sexist attitudes and behaviors) they encounter in their daily campus experiences (Howard-Hamilton, 2003, p. 23). These types of programs may help Black college women who are in Helms' (1990) *encounter* stage explore and reformulate the dimensions of their self-concept, which are externally based.

Furthermore, student affairs professionals that are charged with facilitating leadership courses and co-curricular workshops who work to illuminate the strengths and values of Black women might be able to assist Black college women in establishing a healthy identity as they contend with a wide variety of difficult dating decisions. "Sistah to Sistah" programs facilitated by Black female faculty in conjunction with student affairs personnel may provide a forum in which Black college women can come to value the experiences of women like themselves and connect with these women to form a variety of deep interpersonal relationships. Helms (1990) cited the establishment and maintenance of relationships with other women as central in the process of constructing a positive, internally based definition of womanhood. By providing a combination of culturally relevant programs and activities, the process of Black women's identity development may be improved and the quality of their college dating experiences enhanced.

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