Thugs, Nice Guys, and Players: Black College Women’s Partner Preferences and Relationship Expectations

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Abstract

This paper explores how physical, behavioral, and sexual constructions of black masculinity may affect heterosexual black women’s intraracial partner preferences. A qualitative analysis of data retrieved from thirty black college women at a large research university suggests that attraction and partner selection for these women are likely impacted by idealized images or prototypes of black masculinity. Specifically, respondents identified four categories of black men (the “thug,” the “nice guy,” the “player,” and the “endangered black man” or EBM) that seemed to inform their future partner choices. Moreover, these data suggest that reliance on these stereotypical ideals may result in an ongoing process of bodily negotiation that subsequently hinders more genuine modes of interaction between black men and women.

Introduction

It’s hard dealing with guys especially, well, guys whether you’re 50 or 20, but it is so hard to deal with [black] guys in a relationship and dating issues. . . . Now that I’m getting older, I’m not necessarily looking for a husband, but I don’t want to waste my time either.

—Wendi

There are not like enough black men to go around . . . so it’s like why even try to like look cute and all that stuff, and it’s like it won’t get you anywhere. Most [black women] are probably single too.

—Sabrina
Wendi and Sabrina’s comments are indicators of a contemporary reality. Many argue that relationships within the African American community are in crisis. Black women (67 percent) were more likely to be never-married than black men (61 percent) (U.S. Census Bureau 2012). Almost 40 million black Americans marry or enter committed relationships with other blacks. However, approximately 43 percent of black women have never experienced marriage, compared to 22 percent of white women (U.S. Census Bureau 2004). Despite black women’s motivations to get married (Bulcroft and Bulcroft 1993; Dixon 2009), Bulcroft and Bulcroft (1993) argue that “marriage rates for black females are most likely declining because of a lack of available black males who can meet black women’s high expectations for male family headship” (352). These explanations include, for example, theories of educational mismatch or gendered disparities in college graduation rates and future career opportunities (Bulcroft and Bulcroft 1993; Collins 2004; Dixon 2009). Overall, there is a growing body of work that seeks to understand these intragroup dynamics better (Bulcroft and Bulcroft 1993; Collins 2004; Dixon 2009; Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003; Staples 2006). Still, we actually know very little about how black women perceive black men as potential intimate partners and how these perceptions might impact their attitudes about dating and mate selection. In particular, empirical research on young black women’s appearance ideals and partner preferences remains an underexplored area of academic inquiry.

Given this, I explore how young black women perceive black men as potential partners. Findings from this college-based study complicate our understanding of how black women, in the United States, may approach dating and relationships between them and black men. Specifically, it examines how popular constructions of black masculinity may impact the dating decisions of black women enrolled in college. Further, the data suggest that black women perceive and categorize black men in accordance with four stereotypical prototypes and that these categories may impact their intragroup partnering decisions.

The “Endangered Black Man” Phenomenon

In 1965, Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote a controversial report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, which documented the supposed deterioration and pathologies of black families in the United States. Specifically, the report argued that the absence of a strong black male figure within the
household severely threatened family stability (Moynihan 1967; Rainwater and Yancey 1967). Roughly forty years later, scholars like Collins (2004), Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003), and Staples (2006) examined shifts in the black family structure. They focused on how disproportionate numbers of available black men and women affected intraracial romantic relationships. Particular attention has been paid to the “endangered black man” phenomenon (EBM), a range of social patterns and structural inequities that have contributed to a decline in black men as desirable marital partners for black women. Marriageable black men may be in limited supply, for example, because a disproportionate number of them are incarcerated, paroled, or on probation. In 2009, black men had an incarceration rate over six times higher than that of white men, a trend that has persisted since the end of slavery (Department of Justice 2010). Similarly, black men in the United States are more likely than other populations to have work experiences that may make them less attractive as cohabiting or marital partners. They are more likely than other men to experience underemployment and layoffs, and their unemployment rate in 2010 was 16 percent, twice as high as the national average (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2010). In addition, their interracial marriage rate, approximately 10 percent in 2000, has historically been higher than that of black women (Lee and Edmonston 2005, 12–13). There is some indication, as well, that the increased visibility of black men who identify as gay, bisexual, or on the “Down Low” (attempting to hide their bisexuality or homosexuality by participating in heterosexual relationships) may be other intervening factors that impact black marriage rates (Bulcroft and Bulcroft 1993; Dixon 2009; Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003; Root 2001; Staples 2006). These trends and circumstances may explain why black women are more likely to raise children alone, less likely to marry, and, overall, why they may not find black men especially attractive as long-term marital partners (Bulcroft and Bulcroft 1993; Dixon 2009; Staples 2006). Using a marketplace analysis, Collins (2004, 256) explains EBM in the following manner:

Within these marketplace models of shopping and hunting for suitable love interests within the confines of rules that brand certain people as off-limits, the act of “catching” the right partner takes on extreme importance. . . . For women, the seeming shortage of marriageable African American men becomes defined less by analyzing the myriad social issues that African American men confront (and that contribute to this shortage), but in searching for the elusive good “catch” in a sea of black men as an “endangered species.”
Underlying black women’s perceptions of EBM, however, are raced, gendered, and classed constructions of black heteronormative masculinity. In particular, past and contemporary media representations often emphasize classed depictions of black men as obedient “Sambos” or “cool cats.” Specifically, these binary constructions either focus on black men as sexually nonthreatening or as oversexualized. The former allows for a sense of safety. The latter provokes fear. Adapted from earlier characterizations of the Uncle Tom, the modern Sambo image employs a safe construction of black men as passive, likeable, entertaining, and loyal—an image in keeping with black middle-class America. Epitomized as the race-less and asexual black friend, he does not pose a threat to white society. In contrast, the cool-cat image evokes constructions of a working-class or poor, hyperheterosexual black male thug. The thug is associated with the most popularized negative images of hip-hop culture, for example, criminal behavior, misogyny, and materialism. He is depicted as tough, promiscuous, and prone to violence. While constructed, in many ways, as class opposites, both controlling images help maintain the white hegemonic social order (in Collins 2004, 149–80; Ford 2008, 2011; Majors and Billson 1992). Both images may also affect black women’s dating decisions.

“Relationship Work”: Theoretically Framing Black Heterosexual Women’s Partner Preferences

The theoretical framework for this project is grounded in symbolic interactionism or recognizing the meaning-making systems that people attach to particular objects or behaviors in the social world (Goffman 1959; Hochschild 1983). It also utilizes literature on racial identity development and feminist perspectives on gender identity to better frame the perspectives of black college women. More specifically, while symbolic interactionism provides a foundation for understanding issues of identity and authenticity, race and gender-specific theoretical frameworks more fully elaborate on the social-psychological ramifications of engaging nonhegemonic identities within a hegemonic societal context. The former explores the role that developmental life-stage, self-protective factors, and resiliency play in the identity constructions of blacks in the United States (Crocker et al 1994; Cross 1991; Sellers et al 2003). The latter focuses on gendered constructions
that maintain inequitable structures of power and privilege within society (Bordo 1993, 1997).

How do heterosexual black college women characterize black college men’s physical, behavioral, and sexual representations of self? How, then, do these women explain their decisions regarding partner preferences and dating choices within the black community? And finally, how do perceptions of EBM affect beliefs about future partner prospects? The concept of “relationship work” will help frame the analyses for this paper. In the context of this study, it refers to the sometimes incompatible ways black men and women learn to negotiate their bodies physically and behaviorally for the purpose of finding, attracting, and maintaining a relationship with a chosen partner. Chodorow (1994) theoretically begins this conversation by problematizing current understandings of heterosexual attraction. To that end, she notes,

Heterosexuality, like all sexual desire, is specified in its object. If it were not, any man would suit a heterosexual woman’s sexual or relational object need, and vice versa, whereas in fact there is great cultural and individual psychological specificity to sexual object choice, erotic attraction, and fantasy. Any particular heterosexual man or woman chooses particular objects of desire (or types of objects), and in each case we probably need a cultural and individual developmental story to account for these choices. (1994, 37)

To elaborate more clearly on these cultural and developmental stories, this paper empirically examines black women’s perceptions of black men and how that may impact their dating and partner preferences within intraracial romantic relationships.

**Methodology**

This qualitative study was conducted at a large research University in the Midwest between 2003 and 2005. According to the Office of the Registrar, approximately 9 percent of the University’s 40,000 undergraduate students self-identified as African American or black. Respondents were racially and ethnically diverse, in terms of socioeconomic status. However, this public institution served a primarily middle- to upper-class constituency. Approximately 51 percent of families earned between $75,000 and $199,999 per year. About 19 percent of students had family incomes of $200,000 or more. This
prestigious academic institution retains 96 percent of its students from first to second year, and 85 percent of students graduate within a five-year period. All information in this paragraph was found on the university Web site in 2005 when I was conducting research.

**Sample and Recruitment**

Respondents met the following criteria to participate in the study: (1) self-identified as African American or black, (2) were currently enrolled as an undergraduate student at the university, and (3) were aged eighteen years or older. I recruited participants by introducing my project to over one hundred black and multiethnic student groups on campus, ranging from religious to academically based organizations. In addition to these formal organizations, I also utilized word of mouth and “snowball” sampling to recruit less accessible pockets of participants. This more informal method of recruiting helped to ensure the inclusion of students not closely affiliated with black or multiethnic organizations at the university.

This study focused on the experiences of the thirty heterosexual black women in the sixty-person sample (also see Ford 2011). The women interviewed represented a range of self-reported class backgrounds. Three reported that they were low-income or working-class, but the majority reported middle-upper middle-class statuses. Seventeen had grown up in predominantly black communities, nine in predominantly white, and four in interracial neighborhoods. They reported varying religious backgrounds such as Muslim and agnostic. However, almost all reported following some denomination of Christianity. This was a traditional college-age sample, and subjects ranged in age from 18–23, first-to-senior year-of-college statuses.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

The data collection process consisted of two components: (1) an in-depth qualitative interview that lasted approximately one–two hour(s) and (2) a brief postinterview demographic survey. The semistructured interviews encouraged the women—as both analytical observers and engaged participants with these issues—to reflect on a series of questions related to their perceptions of black femininity, black masculinity, appearance practices and ideals, partner preferences, and attraction. The interviews were transcribed, hand-coded using inductive techniques, and entered into the Qualitative N-Vivo software program for further analysis. I slightly modified direct
Results
Assessments regarding the eligibility of a potential partner are subjective. Narratives of partner preferences, however, are also influenced by raced- and gendered-cultural norms and expectations. In the following subsections, I elaborate on how heterosexual black college women discuss and understand their partner preferences in relation to the black masculinity ideal. In particular, the women in this study rely on four prototypical images of black men that informed their partner preferences within intraracial relationships: (1) the “thug,” (2) the “nice guy,” (3) the “player,” and (4) the “endangered black man” or EBM. The final section, the EBM, explores how the initial three categories contributed to black women’s understandings of their future partner possibilities. All these categories, which inductively arose from the interviews with respondents, mirror pervasive contemporary stereotyped images of black men.

THE THUG: Physical Expectations
These women discussed the characteristics of black men that they found most appealing to them in their consideration of intimate partners. Dark skin, short hair or cornrows, and muscular bodies were the features that they overwhelming valued. Interestingly, their expressed preferences were those popularly associated with a supermasculine, thug-like, or cool persona image of black men. The following comment by Sharee is illustrative of many of the women’s physical constructions of black masculinity:

He looks like—he has the potential to look like a real thug . . . just because he’s dark skinned, he’s got a beard. He looks like a big, grown man. Now that I think about it, it might be because he’s dark skinned.

This image of black men and their masculinity seemed to impact women’s thinking and decision making regarding their partner selection. Janell, for example, describes her ideal partner in the following manner:

Oh, men. Very tall and thick. I like a big football player, eat hamburger type
of man, you know. Muscular, strong and you can have a little stomach to you like a little cushion. Muscular and athletic build, I would say. I’m not really a fan of braids so I would say like a low haircut or like a short Afro or like curly hair. I don’t really like the S-curl type. [S-curl refers to a chemical hairstyling technique that is used among some black men to produce soft curl and/or wave-like patterns.] I don’t like that on men. I like really chocolaty dark skinned men. I will date brown men. I don’t really like light-skinned men.

Likewise, Rhoda playfully asserted, “I would prefer to have like a chocolate lover.” When asked to explain, she continued, “I don’t know. I guess that [they] may seem more masculine maybe.” Others linked dark physical features and the masculinity they implied to seriousness and maturity. Cara, for example, made this analysis:

Actually when I see a darker guy, I think of him as more masculine than the light-skin guy. So, yeah, because I just think, I don’t know, all the very mature guys that I know are darker or brown skin . . . and the really light ones, they are like, he’s going out with this girl and now he’s trying to talk to this [other] girl . . . and I think that’s immature. So, I see the dark-skin ones as more mature, more down to their business than the light-skin guys.

In sum, these women seemed to equate dark skin with masculinity and maturity, as well as with the stereotypical image of the thug.

In contrast, Eisa and Amani, respectively, revealed that lighter skinned or “pretty” men are often implicitly connected with metro/homosexuality or femininity:

I think there’s an idea like the pretty boy and most of the light-skinned guys look like the pretty-boy type and that’s becoming unpopular. Um, and a lot of the—some of the light-skinned guys, they like the S-curl type thing and that’s really unattractive to me and my friends anyway.

Light skinned—but I think that has more to do with a pretty-boy image that some people who are light skin feel the necessity to fulfill and if you are a pretty boy, if you are pretty, then you are metrosexual and if you’re metrosexual then you’re more associated with possibly being homosexual.

By fusing skin color, gender, and sexuality, many of the black women in the study considered light-skinned men to be softer, weaker, less masculine, and
less culturally (or authentically) black than darker-skinned peers (Ford 2008, 2011; Hill 2002; Russell et al. 1992; Staples 2006). Cara, for example, asserted that she “wouldn’t date any of the light-skin guys” on campus because they “think they are so pretty—they are the ones that, you know, they carry brushes around and every free minute they are just brushing their hair or always looking at themselves or walking around with the little pimp walk, I guess [that is] what it is.” Janell added that, in her experience, the lighter men seem “more arrogant and more like a prettier type of ‘stay in the mirror type of man,’ which I don’t really like.” Sabrina contended that she has only dated darker-skinned men because the lighter men were usually “pretty boys”—“like somewhere in their family history they had a white person or they may be mixed so they have like straighter hair and they are light skinned. . . . then they think [they] are the absolute stud. . . . And you know they go off season like every other year.” Others similarly noted that lighter men come in and out of style, while their dark-skin peers remained consistently on women’s list of preferred dating partners.

These explanations tell only part of the story. Agentic narratives of choice and preferences are founded on a sociohistory of racial oppression that maintains hegemonic structures of power and privilege in the United States. Accordingly, Collins (2004, 249) states, “[L]ove may appear to come from nowhere, but it is profoundly affected by the political, economic, and social conditions of the new racism.” More concretely, skin color within the African American community has historically been a topic of discourse. Lighter skin tones that more closely approximate whiteness are often associated with assimilation, class privilege, upward mobility, female beauty, and a positive sense of self (Brown 2004; Edwards, Carter-Tellison, and Herring 2004; Ford 2008; Hill 2002; Hunter 2002; Ross 1997; Russell et al. 1992). In terms of mate selection within heterosexual unions, Ross (1997), for instance, found that dating a partner with a light skin tone is more important to black college men than black women. Similarly, Hill (2002) focused on gendered colorism in the African American community and its impact on perceptions of attractiveness. Hunter (2002) examined the relationship between skin tone, beauty, and life outcomes.

Beyond skin color, the women in this study focused on other physical features of black men. Hairstyles, for example, like skin color, were placed in masculine and feminine categories. From their view, black men with feminine-looking hairstyles were simply unattractive. Shana, for instance, did not like “braids for guys because it looks too feminine.” Wendi argued that men who were constantly changing their appearance, such as wanting to grow
their hair long, were “going through some things. . . . They are searching for themselves.” And Cara did not find appealing men who sported longer hair and curlier eyelashes than she did in her own appearance. She elaborated:

The S-curls I’d say are so young and not right. I don’t think anybody should have hair like that. There’s still some guys that put a wave kick in their hair, and it just looks shiny and gross, which is not attractive at all. So as long as it’s your natural hair. If you have curly hair, wear it curly. Don’t go around straightening it, looking like a woman, which is horrible. I’m sorry. . . . I can’t go out with you.

It is evident from these reports that black college women often construct appearance-related partner preferences that contrast sharply with constructions of femininity (Bordo 1999). They prefer black men to model hairstyles that emphasize their naturalness and short haircuts such as crop cuts, cornrows, or do-rags. Interestingly, these styles are emblematic of the black masculine thug look popularized by the media.

The women also reported that they were primarily attracted to tall and muscular black men. Pearl, for instance, thought that athletes were handsome. Tania admitted that she “will even date an ugly dude as long as he’s tall.” Liane replied, “I go for more of like a body type like football-player-type build. I don’t like short, little guys. I like tall, well-kept men—tall enough for me to wear heels and he not be shorter than me.” Clearly, size matters for these black women. Consequently black men are often deemed less attractive when there is a noticeable “gap between the self and the cultural images” (Bordo 1999, 70).

Finally, in contrast to physical manifestations of black masculinility, these women were unimpressed by black men who seek to maintain a hypersexualized masculine thug image through material possessions. To that end, Aya related the following: “Some guys try to be like a thug, which, there are no real thugs in college if you ask me. And, some guys just try to be hard all the time, and I don’t think that’s necessary . . . baggy pants and a white T-shirt and just, like, you know the way they carry themselves. Like, they try to be cool, you know.” And, Hanna noted,

Oh, of course. Black men, they all want the nice car, the 30-inch rims. A lot of them are into, you know, a lot of the rappers nowadays, it’s all about the bling-bling and everything, with diamonds on every finger, in their ear, the longest chain they can find, the Rolex. It seems like black males are more about money, you know, when they bring the girls, but their focus is on
money. And, that’s the only thing that bothers me is that, you know, if you get a better education, you can make as much as you want, but instead of being focused on that, they’re focused on the next pair of gym shoes or next pair of loafers or the next outfit or whatever.

Aya and Hanna criticized black men for adhering to undesirable thug-like traits, while others compassionately identified the real or imagined constraints that, from their assessment, often served to limit black male behavior. Liane and Pearl, in particular, hypothesized that black men’s embodiment of a stereotypical thug image is partially a developmental phase that may change with maturity. Similarly, Teresa suggested that materialism was a symbolic way to gain respect in the black community.

Still, black women’s perceptions of black masculinity tended to lean toward the thug persona, in spite of these empathetic observations. As an illustration of this point, Cara admitted to having a “color complex” for “tall, dark guys.” She also denounced black men for “all look[ing] the same—little conformists with their bubble jackets, big old baggy pants, Timberland boots and very, very big white T-shirts.” In other words, the physical and material embodiment of the black masculine thug, and its related stereotypes, positively and negatively affected black women’s partner preferences and expectations.

**THE NICE GUY: Behavioral Expectations**

Despite the attractiveness of a “thug”-like image, the data suggests that the thug construction conflicts with black women’s desire to find a “good” black man or “nice guy” on a behavioral level. In terms of physical attributes, a very masculine thug look was valued by most of the women. However, it also appeared that these women expected their partners to challenge the behavioral aspects of the thug, such as misogynistic attitudes, materialistic values, and emotionally distant demeanor. Respondents expressed their desire for black men to adhere instead to more middle-classed constructions of the black friend or nice guy (Collins 2004). This included the expectation that men practice honesty, respect, sensitivity, chivalry, and be future-focused. In particular, most women, like Teresa and Lisa, indicated that they are looking for a “down-to-earth” man or “nice guy who’s got his head on good,” not a “bad boy” or thug.

These binary constructions of black masculinity, infused with classed and
sexualized implications, however, may result in unrealistic partner expectations. Not surprisingly, many of the women in this study report that they infrequently date at the university because, from their experience, there was a virtual absence of good black men or nice guys. The summary by Lisa, highlights the view of others:

Huh. Dating on campus. I think it—maybe I’m not too good of a resource on dating on campus because I never really did it. . . . But, it’s just extremely competitive for everything, like especially, like dating and—I don’t know. . . . People fight over the athletes and the couple of good men that are here.

Like Lisa, Cara also had not dated on campus because, in her assessment “the [black] guys here” are not only “conformists,” but they are also “so weird to me. . . . They are really iffy. They’ll like say something, and then they’ll say I didn’t say that.” Cara continued, “They are just so conceited to me. It might be two or three that’s like not.”

Similarly, Liane summarized the thoughts of others when she explained that “guys here are just a little bit different”:

I know, when I got to campus, the guys here are kind of more like I’m going to sit back and let the girls like talk to me. Chivalry is dead-type deal. . . . When I would go to parties or clubs in [the nearby city] before I came here, guys always try to get on like, “Hey, girl, let me talk to you.” I’m not even saying like “I’m fine” or whatever, but I’m just used to that. When I got here [the university], no one does that. No one will approach. . . . No one will come up to you on the street or if you’re like in the coffee shop and say, “Excuse me.” That has not happened here. I mean, I don’t know. Everyone notices that like, even if you are in a class with a guy, he still won’t say anything.

As Cara and Liane suggested, personality and character were priorities in their conceptualizations of an attractive black man. In addition, Hanna and Amanda argued that nice guys should be able to reevaluate their educational priorities and professional opportunities, including whom they consider role models:

Like, live everyday to the fullest but also have a big frame of mind. You know, look ahead or in the future and see what you can do with yourself.

[They need to] tear down people like Ludakris and Jay-Z as role models, because they’re not. They’re just not. And saying, “These are not our role
models,” and it would be hard to do that because you’re running against this money-making machine, but I think that’s the only way to do it and saying these people are not heroes, you know. Your pastor or your teachers, these are your heroes, you know?

The nice-guy image underscores qualities such as maturity, honesty, reliability, and stability as values and preferred personality characteristics. There are also implicit raced, classed, and gendered elements underlying these expectations. Not only are black men expected to exhibit behavioral qualities that diverge from traditional classed constructions of black masculinity, but they are also expected to know when it is desirable to conform to these constructions and when it is not. For example, as these data imply, black women value physical attributes associated with the thug. Yet, they seem to reject behavioral and materialistic aspects of this same image. These preferences and partner expectations that these women describe were further complicated when they discuss issues of sexual intimacy.

THE PLAYER: Sexual Expectations

The women in this study seemed to want physical and emotional intimacy with male partners. Yet, they expressed frustration with the lack of commitment they perceived on the part of black men. To that end, Lisa noted, “They’re still trifling and not ready mentally [for a real relationship].” Laurie contended, “They [black men] want to date around in college, and black women just want to find just one guy to date.” And, Sabrina added,

They won’t settle down, . . . not all of them but a lot of them won’t settle down. They know like they can have all these different girls because the black community is so small here and like there are so many girls, . . . and they know they are the top 1 percent of the black males in America. It goes right to their heads.

Further, according to Aya, “They’ll [black men] do something with a girl, but they won’t say that that’s their girlfriend, you know.” In addition, Hanna believed that athletes, in particular, have a reputation for having sex with a lot of different women:

I’m attracted to more of the urban type black male, . . . and the guys that fit that description are mainly athletes. The athletes have a lot of groupies. . . .
I know some basketball and football players who have a lot of girls that they just have sex with or whatever. I know what they’re looking for and what they’re accustomed to. So, and it’s like, you know, there’s only a limited amount of guys, and they already have all these females, white and black, chasing after them.

Cara, based on her religious beliefs, chose abstinence until marriage. She also adamantly insisted that being intimate with multiple sexual partners was “way different than manhood. A lot of people think manhood is just like having sex or having a girlfriend. . . . That’s not manhood; that’s just struggling.” Like Cara, others chose to wait until they were involved in committed, monogamous relationships. Andrea explained,

I have five brothers, so basically I’m like the baby girl. My brothers would always say, “Watch what you do, watch how you perceive yourself” because . . . my brother said you go to a party don’t be grinding up on a guy because if you plan to . . . you can go further with that dude than if you are grinding on him; he’s not going to respect you. He’s going to see you as something easy, something quick. So it’s kind of like respect yourself as a woman and then, secondly, respect yourself as a black woman.

For Sabrina, sex was simply not a priority for her circle of black female friends, all of whom were working hard to succeed at this university. As she revealed in the following passage, “something else has to give. . . . I think it’s sex:”

I know a lot of my black friends, and we just don’t have sex because it’s just . . . I think it’s more like it doesn’t fit into our schedules. But it has a lot to do with like, okay, these are my priorities and this is my motivation and like sex doesn’t fit into that. See, that’s why I think it’s a different breed of people that make it to this level. . . . Once you get here and you’re exposed to like the culture shock or not the culture shock or whatever, it’s like you seriously have to be motivated to get through here. I know so many black people here freshmen year and then they weren’t here anymore sophomore year. Once you get [to] like junior year, there has to be something else there, whether it be like religion or motivation or something. And then since there’s that other stuff in there, something else has to give. That’s just how it is. I think it’s sex. Yeah. Not always but I’m just saying you can probably still have sex but just have responsible sex maybe.
Sabrina implicitly drew upon her understandings of the “black lady” as one who is principled and sexually chaste, to make this point: if women are sexually active on campus, they must do so in a socially appropriate way. In other words, black women seeking access to hegemonic femininity must be able to employ, from their view, middle- and upper-classed behaviors of a black lady (Collins 2004; Harris-Lacewell 2001; Jewell 1993). Said differently, hegemonic standards of feminine beauty, sexuality, and relationality become key signifiers of respectability, class mobility, and professional advancement for black women.

For these black college women, engaging in responsible sex within the confines of a monogamous relationship is one way to avoid being labeled a slut or a whore. Men, on the other hand, from the view of these women, learned to prove their masculinity by engaging in heterosexual sex with multiple partners. To do otherwise would result in others challenging their heterosexuality and, ultimately, their sense of self as masculine men. This gendered socialization process has some support in the literature on black manhood and masculinity (Brown 2005; Ford 2011; Staples 2006). Relationships between men and women, then, may be operating under seemingly incompatible gendered norms. This may then challenge effective communication between black men and women and result in the reinforcement of raced and gendered stereotypes.

Jones and Shorter-Gooden’s (2003) research suggests that many black women report difficulty developing respectful and healthy sexual relationships with their partners. It is important to recognize, however, that the noted disconnect between heterosexual men and women’s feelings about love, sex, intimacy, and relationality is not unique to members of the black community. According to Chodorow (1994, 56), “[W]omen are more at ease with mutuality implicitly in love, as well as the surrender, while men tend to interpret mutuality as dependency and defend against it by separating sex from love, or alternatively, by attempting to dominate the beloved.” Similarly, Rubin (1983, 103) argues that “for a woman, sex usually has meaning only in a relational context”; men, in contrast, are thought to be able more easily to separate sex from emotionality.

THE ENDANGERED BLACK MAN (EBM): Expectations for the Future

These women’s expectations for future relationships with black men were clearly influenced by the notion of the endangered black man (EBM). Most asserted that there was a disproportionately low and/or near absence of eli-
gable black male partners with whom they could date, on and off campus. In particular, they felt strongly that it would be a challenge to find a black man who fit their physical (thug), behavioral (nice guy), and sexual (nonplayer) expectations. Consequently, they expressed little hope of locating a good black man. Lisa and Eisa offered further analysis of the situation:

I [would] think that the black woman dating the white man would be more acceptable on campus because the women are kind of fed up with the black man because, yeah, if you catch somebody at college, it’s kind of like being—especially at [this university], if they don’t have baby mamas, or, you know, been in jail before, because they are, you know, pursuing higher education, but they’re still trifling and kind of not ready mentally.

Well, because there’s really not that many, like, good black men, as far as compared to black men who are in jail, . . . so you would think that [available black men], you know, they should marry the black woman. . . . But that’s not the case.

The concerns of Lisa and Eisa may not be completely unfounded. We live in a society in which institutionalized structures of oppression contribute to increased homicide and suicide rates, sizeable unemployment rates, and high incarceration rates for black men (Blumstein 2000; Department of Justice 2010; Sampson and Lauritsen 1997; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2010). It is also true that differential levels of educational and occupational achievement can result in a perceived “marketplace mismatch between available and desirable African American men and women” (Collins 2004, 257). All of the above may contribute to lower likelihood of marriage and cohabitation for black, relative to white, women (Crowder and Tolnay 2000; Raley 1996; U.S. Census Bureau 2004).

In addition to the noted structural challenges, relationship work for black college men often entails navigating between outwardly incompatible images—the thug and the nice guy. Black women’s idealized images of men were incongruent, and, as recent research suggests, black men struggle to balance these conflicting messages (Ford 2011). Thus, participants reported that intrarracial romantic relationships within the university’s black community were rare. Accordingly, the EBM theory clearly resonated with many of these women.
Conclusion

Chodorow (1976, 465) argues that heterosexual relationships are “liable to be strained” in part due to gendered differences in the socialization process and psychological development of boys and girls. Rubin’s (1983) empirical research on heterosexual couples also confirms the differing gendered roles men and women may come to expect of each other. In sum, men and women are still determining how most effectively to negotiate their socially constructed gendered positions and expectations within relationships. This paper does not directly analyze the experiences of men or couples in this regard. However, the emphasis on black women’s perceptions indicates that they may be unsure about how to navigate relationships with black men, especially in light of so many conflicting societal constructions reinforced through popular culture and social expectations.

According to Collins,

> Within individualistic marketplace relations, holding fast to the tenets of the prevailing black sexual politics can foster unrealistic expectations about romance and love relationships and profound disappointment when they fail to materialize (2004, 255).

We live in a society in which we are constantly inundated with raced and gendered images that reinforce unrealistic binary expectations of what men and women should look like and how they should behave to be considered attractive. Men should be tall, muscular, and handsome. Women should be petite, thin, and beautiful. Men are supposed to be strong and independent. Women are supposed to be emotional and compliant. Moreover, storybook romances of happy couples that appropriately assume their gendered roles within the relationship pervade our television screens. Not surprisingly, bodily attraction, partner choices, and dating decisions are typically influenced by media images of idealized bodily perfection and relationship bliss. These cultural messages affect cross-sex relationships within the black community in distinct ways.

Overall, this study highlights the intricacies underlying gendered appearance ideals, attraction, and intraracial dating patterns. More explicitly, it focuses on how constructions of black masculinity may impact the processes of selecting a potential partner for black women. The findings suggest that black women overwhelmingly employ stereotypical constructions of black masculinity when selecting a compatible partner within the university’s black
community. In particular, black women are attracted to men who physically embody the black masculine thug ideal. Simultaneously, they are not looking for a man who dresses like a thug or behaves like a player. Rather, they want a nice guy.

Based on these idealized notions of black masculinity, some of these black women contend that there are no more good black men. From their review and experiences, the numbers of available and dateable black men are diminished by an abundance of black men who are players, those who date white women, others who are incarcerated, and still others who are gay or bisexual. Thus, black women may choose to limit their dating efforts.

Although there is clearly a documented mismatch between available and desirable partners within the black community, we must also consider what women are looking for in a partner and why. Chodorow (1976, 1994) explains that love is profoundly affected by cultural fantasies, social norms of attractiveness, and individual psychologies. Elaborating this point, Collins (2004, 255) states,

> Mass media images of black masculinity and black femininity can have an especially pernicious effect on how black men and women perceive one another. . . . African American women who see black men as being criminally inclined, promiscuous, and dangerous evaluate the worth of their potential sexual partners and love interests through distorted lenses. In the absence of a progressive black sexual politics that redefines black gender ideology, African American women and men can find themselves policing one another’s conformity to a black gender ideology that did not work in the past and that definitely does not work now.

For the black women in this study, confining cultural and gendered images clearly affect partner preferences and relationship expectations. Work such as this is intended to disrupt these detrimental black gender ideologies and, subsequently, support strong healthy relationships within black communities in the United States.

**References Cited**


