

# Factors Influencing Dating Experiences Among African American Emerging Adults

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## Abstract

This study examined sociocultural factors that impact dating and sexual experiences of heterosexual African American undergraduate college students attending a historically Black institution in the Southeastern United States. Specifically, mate availability and relationship involvement were analyzed to document students' experiences, and how these influences may be associated with sexual decision making and behavior. Data from nine focus groups ( $N = 57$ ) were aggregated and four subthemes were identified: competition among women, acceptability of mates, high prevalence of casual relationships, and lowered expectations for commitment. Power dynamics emerged as a contributing factor to the types of relationship involvement, sexual decision-making, and behavior among participants. The importance of prevention programs focusing on situational and cultural variables is highlighted. Additionally, implications for professionals working with emerging adults to consider the impact of the gender ratio imbalance, and perceived power distributions on perceptions of dating relationships, and sexual decision making and behavior are addressed.

## Keywords

African American, emerging adult, dating, mate availability, power

## Introduction

Marriage is often thought of as the ultimate consummation of a relationship. Marriage traditionally signifies commitment, monogamy, stability, trust, and security. Unfortunately, in the African American community, the marriage rate is low and is consistently declining (McAdoo, 2007). Recent data indicate that African Americans<sup>1</sup> are the least likely to marry, and when married, they spend less time married than White Americans (Dixon, 2009; Simons, Simons, Lei, & Landor, 2012). Although marital relationships are infrequent among traditional aged (18–24) college students of all races/ethnicities (Winfield & Whaley, 2005), the desire to begin forming committed relationships can often begin during college years. Both romantic and sexual relationships are important part of many college students' lives. Although there is a sufficient amount of information on the romantic and sexual relationships of college students, there is an unexplained dearth of information on these relationships among young African American men and women. There is even less information on these relationships among African American emerging adults attending historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs).<sup>2</sup>

Emerging adulthood is a term used to classify the developmental period between the ages of 18 and 29, and emerging adults are the individuals who are actively engaged in the psychological and social experiences of emerging adulthood (Syed & Mitchell, 2013). Our study focuses on two sociocultural factors affecting dating experiences of African American emerging adults attending an HBCU in the Southeast region

of the United States. According to data from the U.S. Census Bureau (2011), approximately 17.9 million men and women are enrolled in institutions of higher learning. Of that number, 1 million are African American men and 1.4 million are African American women. According to Knapp, Kelly-Reid, and Ginder (2012) in a National Center for Educational Statistics report, the total African American enrollments at accredited institutions was 2,902,749 and the total number of students enrolled at an HBCU was 264,136. Therefore, of all African Americans enrolled in college during 2010, 9% attended an HBCU. Few studies have examined reasons why African American students choose HBCUs (Freeman, 2005; Van Camp, Barden, Sloane, & Clarke, 2009). However, some research suggests that African American students choose to attend an HBCU because of a sense of belongingness, pride, and to avoid the minority status inherent in attending a Predominantly White Institution (PWI; Van Camp et al., 2009).

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The current study examines the impact of two factors, mate availability and type of relationship involvement, on dating experiences, and how these influences may or may not be linked to African American students' sexual decision making and behavior. Since our investigation is focused on sociocultural factors related to dating, we use the term "gender" throughout the article to refer to socially and culturally constructed roles/groups on campus and in society.

### *Mate Availability*

Although the majority of African American students attend PWIs, the most dramatic discrepancy between men and women in enrollment is seen at HBCUs. Black women outnumber Black men 6 to 1 on HBCU campuses (American Council on Education, 2006; as cited in Alleyne & Gaston, 2010). Differing reasons have been reported to explain the lower number of men as compared to women on Black college campuses. One reason offered by Harknett (2008) is the disproportionate incarceration rates among young Black men. Another reason suggested by Jordan and Cooper (2001) is that African American males often attend high schools with a history of low academic achievement and graduation rates lessening the likelihood that they will make it to college. Despite the reason, the reality is that there are fewer African American men in college than African American women, thereby exacerbating a gender imbalance.

College campuses are essentially markets for romantic and sexual partners (Uecker & Regnerus, 2010). The perceived number of available mates is impacted by the gender ratio within the social and environmental context. This gender imbalance can shape students' perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and experience with relationships in a number of ways. For instance, men may have more negotiating power on campuses where there is a surplus of women. Additionally, men may be less willing to commit to a monogamous or exclusive relationship and perceive more available mate options (Pouget, Kershaw, Niccolai, Ickovics, & Blankenship, 2010) than women. Researchers suggest this may result in women settling for less desirable partners, yielding relationship and sexual power, tolerating behaviors such as infidelity, and having unprotected sex because they feel less able to demand condom use (Ferguson, Quinn, Eng, & Sandelowski, 2006; Jemmott, Catan, Nyamathi, & Anatasia, 1995; Mays & Cochran, 1988; Sobo, 1995; Stephens & Phillips, 2005).

The phenomenon of gender ratio imbalance (disproportionate number of men and women) can yield more power to one gender and can be explained by the social exchange theory (SET; Homans, 1961). The SET posits that relationships are formed on the basis of reciprocity. However, greater power accrues to the partner who is less dependent on the other partner and has more quality alternatives (Peplau & Spalding, 2000). Gender imbalances may affect relationships by influencing the development and maintenance of partnerships, expectations, and comparisons with alternatives. Each person in the dyad performs a cost-benefit analysis and enacts the behaviors that produce the greatest rewards with the fewest costs.

According to the SET, these rewards for women, when they outnumber men, can be love, social status, and/or intimacy. For men, rewards may include more partners, more variety in their partners, and less pressure to commit and/or be monogamous. In terms of costs, for women, the desire to be involved in and maintain relationships with men may be so strong that the acquiescence of power and monogamy are not seen as unreasonable or costly.

### *Relationship Involvement*

It is obvious that mate availability affects relationship formation and maintenance for Blacks and the sociocultural environment of many college campuses (not just HBCUs) may contribute to this by creating a complex dating environment that dictates norms that do not support committed relationships among students (Ferguson et al., 2006). The cultural dynamics on college campuses have gradually moved from sex being seen in a relational context to a more recreational perspective (Hall & Witherspoon, 2011). Researchers noted more permissive sexual behaviors and attitudes of men and women may have shifted over the past century, especially since the sexual revolution in the 1960s (Bogle, 2008; Dixon, 2009; Stinson, 2010). The "rules" that govern relationships have changed such that marriage, or even a committed relationship, is no longer a prerequisite for sexual intercourse. Emerging adults are attending college in greater numbers and not marrying as early, so the college campus becomes a place that provides the space to experiment with sexual behavior, intimacy, and boundaries without parental or university oversight (Stinson, 2010). Although traditional college students are too young to remember this revolution, the effect on relationship patterns is undeniable.

Many students' attitudes have shifted from the traditional desire to form committed long-term monogamous relationships to wanting more casual relationships and "hooking up" (Owen & Fincham, 2011). Although casual relationships and hooking up have been used interchangeably in the literature, there are some distinctions that should be made. Casual relationships can be long term or short term (Simpson & Gangestad, 1991), with strangers (Manning, Longmore, & Giordano, 2000) or friends (Shaffer, 2000) and may eventually lead to a committed relationship. Although Bogle (2008) describes hooking up as a sexual relationship that may or may not lead to a romantic relationship, there are some differences from casual relationships that focus on intent and motivation (Garcia & Reiber, 2008). According to the same source, hookups do not usually include a romantic component nor do they include an underlying friendship. Some research indicates that both types of relationships are very common on college campuses, and estimates as high as 81% of students report at least one incidence of "hooking up" (as cited in Fielder & Carey, 2010). Previous research also indicates that women on campuses with fewer men will likely be more sexually active; however, they will engage in fewer monogamous and/or committed relationships (Uecker & Regenerus, 2010). In other words, they are more likely to engage in casual sexual relationships and hookups on campus.

## Sexual Decision Making and Behavior

The participation in short-term relationships and hookups may be supported by the context and peer norms of the social environment of many college campuses. The prevalence of these types of relationships and hookups vary by campus environment and the demographics of students studied (Shulman & Connelly, 2013). Traditional aged (18–24) undergraduate college students are within the age group that is most affected by sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV, and research has shown that college students frequently engage in risky behaviors (e.g., multiple partners, one-night stands, inconsistent condom use; Alleyne & Gaston, 2010; Davis, Sloan, MacMaster & Kilbourne, 2007; Thomas & Freeman, 2011). While there are studies exploring the impact of gender ratio imbalances among African American adults (e.g., Bon-tempi, Eng, & Quinn, 2008; Wingood & DiClemente, 1997), the college environment warrants more attention. The college campus can create an environment that produces more sexual options with fewer perceived consequences, gendered social norms, and power differentials that make some particularly vulnerable to HIV infection. In their study of gender inequity and HIV risk among African American college students, Ferguson, Quinn, Eng, and Sandelowski (2006) found that men had multiple sexual partners and created a setting where women were forced to decide whether they wanted to share their man. Cultural factors such as gender inequity or gender ratio imbalance can decrease a person's chances of being able to negotiate safer sex and increase their exposure to STIs, including HIV. In this study, we adopted a qualitative methodology using focus groups to address two research questions: (1) What are the perceptions of available mates and experiences with types of relationships among heterosexual African American emerging adults attending this HBCU? (2) How are these perceptions and experiences associated with the participant's sociocultural context and their sexual decision making and subsequent behavior? Focus groups and qualitative methods, in general, provide an opportunity for the researcher to begin formulating new ideas and hypotheses, tentative theories, and conceptual models of the phenomena of interest. Focus groups in particular were selected because they have the advantage of allowing participants to provide not only opinions but also decision-making experiences and their context.

## Method

Data for this article come from a larger mixed-method study exploring sociocultural correlates of sexual behavior among African American heterosexual undergraduate college students (aged 18–25) attending an HBCU in the southeast portion of the United States.

## Participants

Participants included 57 self-identified heterosexual African American undergraduate college students. The gender data for three participants were not provided; however, the remaining

**Table 1.** Summary of Demographics.

Variable	Entire Sample <sup>a</sup> (N = 57)	Men (n = 25)	Women (n = 29)
Age	20.75	21.13	21.38
SD	1.51	1.55	1.40
Range	18–25		
Educational level			
Freshman/sophomore	32.7%	17.4%*	44.8%*
Junior/senior	67.3%	82.6%*	55.2%*
Current relationship status			
Committed relationship	57.7%	56.6%	58.6%
Casual relationship	17.3%	21.7%	13.8%
Currently not involved in a relationship	25.0%	21.7%	27.6%

Note. SD = standard deviation.

<sup>a</sup>Missing demographic data for three participants.

\* $p \leq .05$

sample included 25 men (41.7%) and 29 women (48.3%). The mean age of participants was 20.75 (standard deviation [SD] = 1.51) and most had senior status in college. See Table 1 for demographic information.

## Recruitment and Procedure

Participants were recruited on campus via Institutional Review Board approved fliers posted in common areas. The fliers provided the eligibility criteria and indicated that students should contact the researcher if interested. Once the researcher was contacted, a brief screening was administered to confirm eligibility.

Participants were eligible for inclusion in the study if they identified as African American, heterosexual, and were between the ages of 18 and 25, inclusive. Additional criteria included (1) full-time student status, (2) single (not married), and (3) reasonably comfortable talking about sexual behavior. The study was a mixed-method project, so students were excluded if they were unwilling or unable to participate in either the quantitative survey or the focus group. Eligible students signed a consent form for participation in the study which included consent to be audiotaped in the focus groups.

Students completed an anonymous online survey prior to participating in a focus group. After each student was screened, he or she was given a random unique code to enter into the survey online. The code was only entered to keep an accurate count of the screened participants who completed the survey and to verify this total with the number of students in the focus groups. A total of nine focus groups, comprising of three to seven students each (average of six students per group), took place on campus. Each focus group lasted between 70 and 90 min, was audiotaped with a digital recorder, and was stratified based on gender and age. This helped ensure a diverse representation of students in the study, meanwhile allowing them to speak freely without the influence of gender and age differences impacting group dynamics. We also wanted to investigate and compare any possible confounding caused by gender, so we conducted coed groups (still stratified by age)

as well. Three focus groups were conducted only with women, three only with men, and three mixed gender. Two focus groups were conducted with younger students in each category (aged 18–21) and one with older students (aged 22–25). Students between the ages of 18 and 21 make up the majority of full-time students on campus, so there were more groups accommodating them. Any personal identifiers included during the sessions were excluded from the transcripts. Students were provided with refreshments and a financial incentive worth US\$20 for their participation.

The principal investigator, an African American social psychologist with extensive experience in both sexual behavior research and focus groups facilitation, conducted all of the focus groups with the women and the coed groups. Another faculty member, an African American male sociologist trained in qualitative methods, conducted all of the focus groups with the men. The racial and gender matching of researchers and participants, particularly on sensitive topics, has “methodological capital.” According to Gallagher (2000), methodological capital helps to build rapport, cooperation, and trust, and to gain access to “authentic” views and experiences of the participants.

## Measures

**Sociodemographic information.** The online survey included questions about participants’ sexual history and demographic information such as gender, age, educational level, and current relationship status.

**Mate availability.** A 3-item scale assessing participants’ perceptions of mate availability was administered. This scale was author developed ( $\alpha = .78$ ) and participants responded on a Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree and 6 = strongly agree). The three statements were: (1) There is a shortage of eligible Black men/women for me to date; (2) My opportunity for a romantic relationship with a Black man/woman is limited; and (3) It is difficult to find available Black men/women to date. Instructions told students to answer questions based on what is most appropriate for them and to keep in mind that the following pertain to the campus environment. Higher scores indicated less perceived mate availability.

**Interview guide.** A semistructured interview guide was developed by the principal investigator based on key issues and research related to sexual behavior and decision making among African American college-aged students in the literature. The interview guide contained six key areas (mate availability, relationships, relationship dynamics, perceived vulnerability to STIs/HIV, culture, and sexuality/sexual behavior); however, for the purposes of this article, only two (mate availability and relationships) are addressed. All focus groups opened with introductions, ground rules, an explanation of the project, and then a general question, “What do you think are some of the health issues affecting young people in your age group?”

The following focus group questions were analyzed for this article:

1. What do you think the ratio of Black men to Black women on campus is (not assuming that Black men only date Black women, and vice versa)?
2. What impact, if any, do you think the ratio of Black men to Black women on campus has on (1) mate availability; (2) relationships (perception of, and engagement in); and (3) sexual decision making and behavior?

## Data Analysis

All recorded focus group sessions were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription company and checked for accuracy. The analysis team consisted of the principal investigator, a faculty member in the same department, a research associate, and two student research assistants. We thought it was important to have students in the same age groups as those in the focus groups to help provide ecological validity to the coding procedure. In the initial phase of analysis, all members read the sections of the transcripts which corresponded with the topics of mate availability and relationships. The team met bimonthly to discuss the phenomena identified relevant to the structural and cultural factors of relationships. A two-prong coding process took place: (1) deductive coding using a coding scheme and Atlas.ti 6.2 and (2) inductive coding to identify major themes. These themes were summarized, discussed at the team meetings, and refined.

## Results

### Mate Availability

The overall mean score on the Mate Availability scale was 10.06 ( $SD = 3.52$ , range 3–18). Both men and women acknowledged that men had more options for available partners than women on campus. Although a trend was observed between the scores of the men and women, significant differences were not found,  $t(50) = -1.184$ ,  $p = .076$ . Missing data were found for seven of the participants and their data were excluded from the  $t$ -test. Two thirds (69.3%) of those who completed all questions *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that Black men have many options for available mates while only 28.8% *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that Black women have many options for available mates. In fact, more participants *disagreed* or *strongly disagreed* (30.7%) with the latter statement. Students were asked how many Black men are there for every 100 Black women on campus. The reported mean was 28.46 ( $SD = 20.05$ , range 1–100). More than half of the participants (51.9%) believed the number was less than 25 men for every 100 women. When analyzing the data related to mate availability, there were two main themes that arose: gender ratio imbalance and acceptability. The themes, along with illustrative quotations from focus group members, are presented below.

**Gender ratio imbalance.** Perceptions of the gender ratio imbalance revealed participants’ estimates of the number of potential mates available. In the focus groups, both women and men

tended to overinflate the numbers. For example, two of the older women participants put the ratio at 10 to 1 and 5 to 1 (with women outnumbering men). Even after being told the actual ratio on campus (2.5 women to every 1 man), participants in the younger women's group continued to believe the rates were higher. In fact, one young woman responded by saying "...like its 30 women to every one guy." In discussing their perception that women outnumber men on campus, one younger man (aged 18–21) stated:

Just look around a college campus and you see female after female after female. And if you look around you see two males in a room full of females or just anywhere you go. You can see that. Or especially in certain professions. Like being a teacher or pursuing a degree in teaching, you'll see in the classroom that it's ten to one, two to six as far as many females there are compared to me.

One issue that arose in the focus groups was about competition between women on campus for the attention of the men. Some of the competition was based on self-imposed pressure, while others noted peer pressure to "compete" for the attention of popular men (e.g., athletes, fraternity members) by dressing a particular way on campus. One older woman (aged 22–25) remarked that younger women, particularly freshman, may feel the pressure more than the upper classmen. She remembered her freshman year and noted:

My freshman year like everybody was wearing heels. And I'm talking about throughout the course of the day—like their first week when the freshmen come in and we're all meeting each other—throughout the course of the day you would see girls changing clothes throughout the day. Like changing outfits throughout the day.

A younger woman commenting on the same topic said, "I think it's like a competition thing... they want to be seen and so they try harder to get seen." Additionally, a participant in the young coed group surmised that "the females are in competition for the males."

**Acceptability.** In addition to the gender ratio imbalance impacting perceptions of mate availability, participants expressed concerns about the suitability or acceptability of available mates. Many of the older participants, both men and women, indicated that although mates are available, men and women are focused on different aspects of dating. For example, a few participants in the older groups indicated that men were available to date and that there were plenty to choose from, but they were perceived to be unacceptable men to date.

Probably there are plenty of men out there, it's just finding some that are worth something to a certain extent. (Older woman)

For men it's like quantity. For women, it's more like quality. (Older man)

As more discussion about availability versus acceptability ensued, comments on the criteria that deemed a person suitable and/or acceptable were made. Initially, the conversation was around superficial attributes like physical appearance; however, as the conversation progressed, more sincere concern about compatibility was expressed. One older woman participant noted:

It's hard even with ones our age, you know? And I'd like for somebody to—well, I have a boyfriend but if I were dating I will be looking for somebody that's at least like on my level. Like, at least have a job and at least have your own means of transportation. And, you know, be doing something with yourself.

### *Relationship Involvement*

Students were asked to talk about the impact, if any, the ratio of men to women on campus had on relationships. Two topics of robust discussion were the high prevalence of casual relationships and lowered expectations for committed relationships. Both of these themes were associated with students' sexual decision making and behavior.

**Prevalence of casual relationships.** Students indicated that the gender ratio imbalance on campus increased the presence of casual relationships and "hook-ups" on campus. In general, the older women indicated they were interested in committed relationships but were often involved in casual, nonmonogamous relationships, or "hook-ups" because men on campus were not interested in commitment.

I'm a little bit older I don't want no casual relationship ... It's time to stop playing around and looking for something a little more serious. (Older woman)

... all the guys want a casual relationship ... you don't really have a choice. (Older woman)

Many of the men in the focus groups supported the perception that they were not interested in commitment at this point in their lives. One younger man said "I think a large majority of that has to do with the fact that you know men are the minority here. So we're not choosing." His statement reflects the sentiment among male participants that they do not have to pursue a woman on campus; the women are often pursuing the men (i.e., "choosing" them). One younger man expressed his views that the overwhelming majority of relationships on campus would be considered casual or hooking up relationships. Responding specifically, to the question "how prevalent do you think casual relationships are on this campus?" he said "I think they [casual relationships] happen a lot ... 90 or 95%."

Both men and women talked specifically about the higher number of women on campus being seen as advantageous for men because it put them in a position where they could have

multiple casual relationships and/or hookups with women. One younger woman said:

I think it [ratio imbalance] allows them to have a casual relationship with more than one person ... guys like it because they'll have more girls. [They] have all these options, so one is not enough.

An older male participant echoed the sentiment:

... what's the likelihood that we gonna want to be in a committed relationship when we got all this candy in front of us?

As we discussed casual relationships, the idea of "settling" was a prominent theme in the focus groups with both older and younger women. Settling was operationalized by a few women as wanting committed relationships, but accepting other relationships (e.g., casual, hook-ups). When asked why they would settle for these types of relationships, if this is not what they want, one young woman replied "because that is what guys want ... you don't really have a choice."

*Lowered expectations for committed relationships.* The combination of the gender ratio imbalance and prevalence of casual relationships on campus seemed to contribute to both male and female students' lowered expectations of committed relationships. An older male participant expressed awareness of diminished expectations by saying "expectations get lowered .... there's nothing really to be expected from the male." There was some discrepancy with the definition of committed relationships among the students, based on age and gender. Participants in the older men and women, and younger women focus groups understanding of "committed relationships" seemed to be interchangeable with the term "monogamy." One younger woman said that a committed relationship means that "you're with that one person and that one person only."

However, a few of the younger men felt that women should "expect" that they may have sex with other women. One younger man said "you can go with different people and it's understood. The ground rules are already set." Another younger man said "women know the deal ... it's expected that she ain't the only one." Most of the men in the older focus groups did not concur with the younger men that the "expectation" of concurrent partnerships was the norm with women on campus. One older man said "that is just a young way of thinking of things." One of the older male athletes expressed his thoughts on women's expectations of monogamy by saying, "women who know their worth expect monogamy and a man who values her worth will give it to her ... I didn't think like that when I was younger."

Men in the younger focus groups seemed to be in agreement of the importance of having a "main" woman (similar to a committed partner) and felt they should not have to "choose" to be with just one woman. Much of the discussion in one focus group was summed up by one of the self-proclaimed "leaders on campus" who said "my main woman is who I love and trust,

my side chick is who I kick it with in certain situation ... there's too much temptation up here ... she [main woman] knows what's up." Furthermore, some of the men suggested that having sex with another woman did not denote an emotional attachment to her. One said, "... you can go and mess with this one girl and then just you don't care nothing about her like that." Another man said "you feel loved with your [main] girl" and then went on to say "you can't catch no feelings for the side chick, just have sex or kick it, no feelings." Engaging in sexual relationships with multiple partners was seen as an acceptable social norm supported by many of the other men in the groups. One younger man expressed that the temptation of being on a campus dominated by women complicated committed relationships:

I think a large majority of that has to do with the fact that you know men are the minority here. You know, we don't necessarily have to perform to just be with one woman. For what? [There are] a lot of them here.

### *Power and Sexual Decision Making*

Although not explicitly addressed in the focus group questions, the topic of power was brought up by participants in all the groups. Power was seen as an important factor in the development of sexual attitudes, types of relationship involvement (casual vs. committed), sexual decision making, and sexual behavior of students on campus. Participants volunteered their views of how the gender ratio imbalance was indicative of a power imbalance that impacted dating and sexual behavior. Power was defined by one young woman as "control over sex in the relationship." She went on to say:

I think that power and sex are kind of the same. Like, I know several people who probably never would've even had sex like that 'cause it's not important to them, but they did it because it was that, well, I might not find nobody else, 'cause there's nobody really here, and it's like things of that nature.

Some of participants indicated that because a higher number of women are available on campus, men, in general, hold more power in the relationship. The belief that men will just "go find someone else" was very prevalent and contributed to the rivalry among women (older and younger). Two participants elaborated on this belief by saying:

Some guys straight up let you know I'm doing you but I still got other girls so you better. Like they make it a competition like you know she over there doing other things that you need to be doing. (Older woman)

Here [on this campus] it's like, Okay, well maybe he could possibly find another girl, so I can try to maybe step more outside of myself and be a little bit more flexible, because there is that shortage of guys that are on this campus. (Older woman)

Power dynamics within certain types of relationships were discussed and distinctions between committed and casual relationships were found. One participant in the younger women's group suggested that men have power in casual relationships but not committed relationships:

I think in committed it's more the woman. Yeah. And if it's casual you know, I think it's the man, it depends on what kind causal relationship it is.

An interesting discussion about behaviors engaged in by younger versus older African Americans revealed a perceived shift in "power" for women by some of the men. One older man noted that "as people age, women have more power in the relationships." He went on to provide commentary on the disparity between the educational attainment and income of adult Black men and women in society. The general perception among men in both the younger and older groups was that as a younger man you have more power because women are trying to form committed relationships with you, and they have not reached a level of professional success yet. Once women reach a certain level of professional success, the dynamics often change. He noted that "when you get older, if you look at the numbers, [Black] men have more to lose in leaving her than she has to lose leaving him."

## Discussion

Syed and Mitchell (2013) note that most research on emerging adulthood has been conducted with college students who attend large, 4-year, research-based institutions and has not explored the diversity of college students. Our findings present needed information about African American emerging adults attending an HBCU and their dating experiences by examining mate availability and relationship involvement, and their connection to sexual decision making and behavior. In our study, women outnumbered the men on campus, which is consistent with most American college campuses (Uecker & Regnerus, 2010). This gender imbalance appeared to influence the development and maintenance of romantic and sexual relationships for the participants. In terms of mate availability, women saw themselves as having fewer options for dating on campus, and this contributed to the perception of competition among women. Buss (1988) noted in his study on intrasexual competition among undergraduates that self-promotion, the enhancement of characteristics and/or altering appearance to improve the ability to compete against other women, was the most popular tactic used. This is in concert with the Fisher and Cox (2011) findings that women compete for the attention of men by using traits, abilities, and behaviors deemed desirable by the men. The women in our study used strategies such as dressing a certain way and agreeing to engage in certain types of relationships desirable by men (e.g., casual relationships and hook-ups) to obtain available mates. Competition among women may be seen as "beneficial" for men because it increases their "rewards" and reduces their "costs" within relationships

(Pouget et al., 2010). The issue of acceptability versus availability of mates was discussed during the focus groups. Some women in our study noted that men may be disqualified as potential mates because they did not meet their "standards." However, these standards, realistic or unrealistic, were being compromised by some women on campus and their ability to be selective in mate choices was complicated by the perceived lack of acceptable men to date. Taken together, these challenges can have deleterious consequences for sexual decision making and behavior among women.

The participants' perceptions of mate availability, competition, and acceptability support the tenets of SET. As a result of the gender ratio imbalance, women were more likely to accept undesirable behaviors from men in exchange for relationship engagement. This dynamic has set in motion a climate in which some women are "settling" for undesirable partners and for types of relationships they do not want (e.g., casual and/or hook-ups). The shortage of available men increased the bargaining position of men, and women were often competing for men they may not have otherwise paid attention to. Women who will go to great lengths to compete with other women may find themselves engaging in risky sexual behavior such as concurrent partnerships and unprotected sexual intercourse.

## Relationship Involvement

Connell's (1987) theory of gender and power suggests gender imbalances manifest within heterosexual relationships in three major ways: division of labor, power, and cathexis. These imbalances can account for a person's willingness to adopt and maintain sexual risk reduction strategies (Newsome & Airhiennenbuwa, 2013), perceptions of power, commitment, and roles assumed in relationships (Prather et al., 2006). Two of the three tenets, sexual division of power and cathexis, were evident in the responses given by students. The sexual division of power posits that a disparity in power between men and women facilitates the perception by women that they have little control over sexual decision making and behaviors. An imbalance in power dynamics emerged as a contributing factor to the type of relationship students were involved in, and the types of behavior they engaged in. Both men and women felt men had more power in casual relationships (which were thought to be the most prevalent on campus) because, numerically, they were in greater demand. Being in limited supply provided men with the power to define the type of relationships they engaged in with women. This inequity of power also resulted in women having lowered expectations for commitment and fidelity by men. Previous research indicates that patterns of commitment and monogamy are individualized concepts, but generally vary by gender and developmental stage (Towner, 2013). In our study, commitment (or being in a committed relationship) was equated with monogamy among women and older men in the focus groups but not among younger men. Moore and Rosenthal (as cited in Towner, 2013) reported that young men, especially young African American men, were infrequently monogamous, yet expected monogamy from their partners. It

is unclear whether the younger men in this study were following traditional hegemonic masculinity which encourages men to have multiple sexual partners (Dolcini, Harper, & Coe, 2007; Kalmuss & Austrian, 2010) or if they were fearful of the perceived restraints commitment and/or monogamy may represent (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009). Both commitment and monogamy are multifaceted concepts and require more exploration among emerging adults.

An interesting observation was the anticipated shift of power noted in both the younger and older men's focus groups. Both men and women in our study acknowledge the conditional power that men hold when they are in greater demand. The men were aware of statistics that indicate African American women are outpacing African American men in education and income. However, there was a realization, and acknowledgment, that this perceived (or actual) power they have on campus may fade as they age. Some men felt they needed to embrace the power they have on campus as it is quite possible that the dating dynamics will change and they will not be as "desirable" to African American women after college.

Cathexis refers to the norms that govern appropriate behavior and attachment. We found that the students' perceptions were that men on campus set the norms related to dating and sexual behavior. Owen, Rhoades, Stanley, and Fincham (2010) note that when it is known that men on campus have more options, as in our study, they may feel it is the "norm" to engage in sexual concurrency, even if they have a "main" partner. Sexual concurrency (multiple simultaneous or overlapping sexual relationships) has been shown to increase STI and HIV transmission among heterosexual African Americans (Adimora & Schoenbach, 2005; Brown, Sales, DiClemente, Latham Davis, & Rose, 2012). The sexual community on HBCU campuses are much like the broader African American communities in that the gender ratio imbalance intensifies power imbalances within relationships that may manifest in women feeling less able to negotiate safer sex (e.g., condom use, monogamy) with men (El-Bassel, Caldeira, Ruglass, & Gilbert, 2009). African American women, on and off HBCU campuses may be putting themselves at increased risk of contracting STIs, including HIV, because they may feel compelled to be more tolerant of a male partner's concurrent partnerships because of the lack of alternatives (El-Bassel et al., 2009; Ferguson et al., 2006; Senn, Carey, Vanable, Urban, & Sliwinski, 2010). These lack of alternatives (i.e., partners) may impact women's self-protective behaviors in ways that are driven by emotions such as fear of losing a partner or fear of not finding another (El-Bassel et al., 2009).

### **Implications for Working With Emerging Adults on Campuses**

Although participation in dating and relationship experiences are a natural part of the college experience for students, we must keep in mind that the development of attitudes, expectations, and behaviors are carried with them throughout adulthood. While the students in our study seemed to be aware of

the gender ratio imbalance and power dynamics, and how it can impact sexual decision making and behavior, it is not clear how much forethought about these decisions and behavior is taking place. It is important to make sure our young people understand that dating and forming relationships is important; however, the development of positive self-esteem and self-worth, standards, goals, and aspirations are just as important. A sexual health program including discussions about healthy relationship decisions can be important to college students and help them identify expectations about romantic relationships, both casual and committed (Owen, Rhoades, Stanley, & Fincham, 2010). The romantic experiences of emerging adults help shape the perception and approach to adult relationships (Simons et al., 2012). Helping students understand the costs and benefits, both immediate and long term, of their choices and behaviors will help facilitate healthier sexual decisions and subsequent behavior.

In a recent review of sexual health among HBCU students, Younge, Corneille, Lyde, and Cannady (2013) report that few studies provide lived experiences of HBCU students as it relates to relationship and sociocultural factors. More studies need to explore the extent to which these, and other variables, have been incorporated within current sexual health and/or STI/HIV prevention programs on HBCU campuses. While the focus of this article is on African American emerging adults on an HBCU campus, the issues discussed among our students might be transferrable to other college populations. If women are outnumbering men on college campuses, in general, then more women are likely to encounter some of the same issues around mate selection, relationship involvement, and sexual decision making described here. Trying to change social norms that dictate lowered expectations and/or settling for partners is of great importance to the development and maintenance of healthy psychological functioning for young people.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

This study provides information on a population not often represented in the literature on relationships—African American college students attending an HBCU. We were able to focus on characteristics that shape attitudes and formation of relationships when many other studies focus solely on behavior (see Bogle, 2008; Fielder & Carey, 2010; Garcia & Reiber, 2008; Owen et al., 2010). Future research should examine the complexity of African American college student dating relationships to identify factors associated with sexual decision-making practices to inform potential interventions.

One of the limitations of the study is that we did not delve into the familial and/or other social relationships of the students. This may have provided additional insight into whether some of the beliefs about relationships were already shaped prior to coming to college or developed on campus. Future studies should examine attitudes, values, and norms from a social-ecological perspective to allow more insight into the dynamic relationships among various personal and environmental factors contributing to dating behavior of these young adults.

Students were not required to report whether or not they were currently involved with someone outside of the campus. Based on the gender ratio imbalance and perceptions of acceptability, some women may choose to date those outside of the campus environment. Students may have been primed to positively or negatively react to certain “hot button” issues such as gender ratio imbalance and power dynamics because they were instructed to complete the online survey prior to focus group participation. Finally, in future research, the number of HBCUs studied should be expanded to explore comparisons among HBCUs. For instance, do differences exist between public and private institutions? Are there differences in dating attitudes on campuses that experience a severe gender ratio imbalance versus those that do not?

## Conclusion

Shulman and Connolly (2013) note that the romantic lives of emerging adults reflect a general pattern of unpredictability in commitment and are often characterized by involvement in unstable relationships (e.g., casual and/or hookups). The same authors posit that during the emerging adulthood stage, particularly as a college student, there are a number of simultaneous demands and serious dilemmas that young people have to cope with and resolve. The desire to form and maintain relationships, of any kind, is one of these dilemmas. Emerging adults may be ready psychologically to engage in committed relationships, but may not have the financial or emotional resources required to sustain a serious relationship. Therefore, casual relationships and/or hookups provide immediate short-term gratification without long-term financial or emotional commitment. More studies, quantitative and qualitative, are needed to examine this stage of development among African American college students on the campuses of both HBCUs and PWIs. This will provide much needed data and insight on this population and help researchers and practitioners identify differences as well as similarities that will aid in appropriate and effective program development on college campuses.

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## Notes

1. African American and Black will be interchanged throughout the article based on how information is reported in the sources cited.
2. Historically, Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) are institutions of higher education in the United States established with the intention to serve members of the Black community.

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