

Adolescent African American Males' Characterizations of Healthy Dating Relationship: A Challenge to One-dimensional Stereotypes

Donna Howard¹, Claude John, Brian Gilchrist, Irwin Royster and Nancy Aiken

Department of Behavioral and Community Health, University of Maryland School of Public Health, 2387 SPH, College Park, MD 20742, USA

Corresponding author: Donna Howard, Department of Behavioral and Community Health, University of Maryland School of Public Health, 2387 SPH, College Park, MD 20742, USA, Tel: (301) 405-2520; Fax: 301.314-9167; E-mail: dhoward1@umd.edu

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Abstract

Study background: This study explored adolescent African American (AA) males' characterizations of healthy teen dating relationships.

Methods: A qualitative study was conducted with 18 AA males recruited from schools and community youth groups around Washington DC. Recruitment methods included convenience and snowball sampling. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted. Analysis consisted of open coding, sorting, aggregation and synthesis of responses to two questions: "What do you value in a dating relationship?" and "What makes a relationship healthy?" Through an iterative process, emergent themes and sub-themes were generated.

Results: Narratives provided multi-layered, descriptive characterizations of healthy dating dynamics. Four themes- Trustworthy Relationship, Communication, General Connection/Compatibility and Respectful Relationship- and seven sub-themes emerged.

Conclusion: Adolescent AA males exhibit the capacity to play a central role in the promotion of positive dating relationship dynamics. The lens of first personal narratives challenges one-dimensional stereotypes of young AA males and functionally advances the reclamation of their personal integrity and worth.

Keywords: Adolescents; Males; African American; Sexuality

Introduction

Adolescent African American (AA) males are frequently portrayed as perpetrators of interpersonal and teen dating violence (TDV) [1,2]. Despite this depiction, non-sexual TDV is largely reciprocal in nature with both partners likely to be perpetrators and/or victims [3,4]. Calls for prevention efforts are increasingly directed toward both males and females [5,6]. Yet, a paucity of programs and research begin with the premise that what males' value in a dating relationship is positive and worth building upon. Programs that specifically target adolescent males are often framed around raising awareness of abusive dating dynamics, promoting gender equitable attitudes and social norms [7,8]. The foundation of these programs partially rests upon the embodiment of attitudes by males that may legitimize or tolerate violence perpetration. This is not to dismiss the laudability of such programs or existing data on male perpetration of dating violence and its concomitant attitudinal correlates (i.e., masculinity norms). It is to underscore the need to also acknowledge and build upon males' positive attitudinal processes [9,10]. Efforts must be made to promote healthy masculinity and deconstruct unhealthy stereotypical depictions.

Scant research has investigated the qualities that minority adolescents, particularly AA males, attribute to a healthy dating relationship. Among AA and Latino youth, Guzman and colleagues [11] found that teens put a high value on respect, which encompasses dynamics such as being faithful and not cheating. Yet, adolescents in

the study had low expectations for experiencing these qualities in their own dating relationships. Males did express the idea that teens, especially girls, need to respect themselves in order to demand respect. In perhaps the only study examining the meaning of respect in romantic relationships among low-income AA youth, Gowen and colleagues [12] found that respect is about being "treated right". Outside of the school context, Akers et al., [13] present data from focus groups with AA parents whose concerns largely reinforced stereotypes about gender roles in sexual violence, primarily presenting females as victims and males as perpetrators. While campaigns and curricula have been implemented to prevent TDV and promote healthy relationships (e.g., Dating Matters initiative), it is unclear if dialogue with male youth, particularly AA males, were included in their development [14].

The voices of adolescent AA males are largely missing from research on TDV or have been co-opted in ways that diminish their integrity. As far back as 1994, Greenberg and Schneider [15] argued that the dominant discourse surrounding the public health problem of violence framed young black males as the "answer", ie problem, regardless of the question. More recently, the New England Journal of Medicine's editorial, #BlackLivesMatter-A Challenge to the Medical and Public Health suggests we have a moral and professional obligation to encourage critical dialogue and action on issues of racism and health [16].

Voices of youth both inform and help contextualize essential historical experiences and cultural values that are salient for effective interventions. We endeavored to enrich existing narratives by

including the voices of young AA males as they describe the qualities and dynamics of a healthy dating relationship. This study is part of a broader research agenda aiming to understand the socialization factors that influence adolescent beliefs and behaviors surrounding their dating relationships. Specific research questions for this study were: What do adolescent minority males see as the qualities of a healthy dating relationship? What do adolescent minority males value in a dating relationship?

Materials and Methods

Research design and sample

This qualitative research study involved in-depth semi-structured interviews with adolescent AA males recruited through snowball sampling from local schools, neighborhoods and community youth groups in greater Washington DC. This qualitative research study involved in-depth semi-structured interviews with adolescent AA males recruited through snowball sampling from local schools, neighborhoods and community youth groups in greater Washington. After Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, written youth assent and parental consent were obtained. Participants were given \$20 in appreciation of their time and a listing of resources on healthy dating relationships and TDV.

Measures

Semi-structured interviews were based on an interview guide developed to broadly address teens' ideas of healthy and unhealthy relationship dynamics. Two questions began the interviews, "What do you value in a dating relationship?" and "What makes a relationship healthy?" Interviews averaged 48 minutes. After 18 interviews, a review of transcripts revealed that breath saturation was achieved [17,18].

Analytic strategy

The analytic approach was Qualitative Description (QD) [19,20], which aims to describe participant's perceptions and experiences in the world they navigate. We began with open coding, progressed through sorting, data resorting and aggregation, generation and synthesis of distinctive themes and sub-themes [19].

We maintained an audit trail, consisting of accurate and detailed records and descriptions of the research process. During the open coding phase one research assistant (RA) was given word documents that contained all 18 participant responses to each of the two research questions. The RA was tasked with creating a table that captured: a) terms (i.e., adjectives and or phrases) the participants used to describe healthy relationships or what males value in a relationship; b) IDs of participants who articulated each term; and, c) verbatim segments of the narratives where these terms emerged. We implemented a form of investigator and methodological data triangulation [21,22].

The second RA on our team was provided verbatim transcriptions of all the interviews and was given the same task, i.e., creating a table that included terms, ID's and verbatim segments. He, however, was specifically instructed to ignore participant responses to the two specific questions and focus instead on an examination of the remaining transcript. Through an iterative process, tables were merged to form one summary table that encompassed all the terms, quotes and ID's. A second order data analysis step was then initiated to generate broad emergent themes and subthemes that captured the essence and context of participant responses (Table 1). This involved, labelling and

tagging the data, creating links between categories by sorting them according to levels of generality and employing a hierarchical structure so that themes and subthemes start to emerge [23].

Theme	% (n) ¹
Theme 1: Trustworthy Relationship	
Honesty	50.0 (9)
Theme 2: Communication	
Open-Easy Communication	94.4 (17)
Conflict Resolution	44.4 (8)
Theme 3: General Connection/Compatibility	
Smart and Independent	77.8 (14)
Emotional Connection/Confidant	61.1 (11)
Physical Connection	55.6 (10)
Theme 4: Respectful Relationship	
Boundaries and Balance	38.9 (7)
¹ Percent of participants that mentioned each sub-theme; N=18	

Table 1: Adolescent Minority Males Characterizations of Healthy Dating Relationships: Emergent Themes and Sub-Themes.

Results

The sample consisted of 18 youth; 50% were recruited from a community-based Planned Parenthood youth program, 28% from a local high school, and 22% from a neighborhood youth club. All participants self-identified as AA; their mean age was 16.6 years (range: 13-21). Four main themes emerged, each with a variable number of sub-themes.

Theme 1: Trustworthy relationship

"If I don't trust my partner, then why am I even dating... relationship is not a relationship if you don't have trust between each other."

A Trustworthy Relationship was seen as the mainstay of a healthy teen dating relationship. Trustworthy Relationship addressed Honesty, which was seen as a thread in an interwoven fabric, which included another main theme, Communication: "Like long as you got honesty and communication you got everything cuz everything else fall into play." For a relationship to be trustworthy it needed to be built upon honesty.

Sub-theme: Honesty

Participants viewed Honesty as a complex, multi-dimensional construct that included being straightforward, genuine and open. Honesty was described as being "truthful", "not playing games", and a willingness to "tell each other everything." An important element was the notion of authenticity, which was characterized both as "being yourself" and "you have to be who you are at all times." Sometimes referred to as "acceptance", participants clearly conveyed the notion that you had to be accepted as you are, not based on some pretense. A centralizing belief, which resonated throughout the narratives, was that

"honesty leads to trust, if you have honesty then you have trust." Some participants indicated that they valued honesty more than anything else. Yet, males did reflect that there may be "limits to being honest... don't want to hurt partner...it depends on how hurtful it gets." Participants conveyed the message that in an honest relationship, neither partner should have to mistrust or question where the other was or who s/he was with. A key element was that a healthy relationship should not involve dishonesty, such as cheating, or provoke incessant monitoring, which would reflect untrustworthiness:

She should be able to trust him not to be messing around with other girls, not messing around behind the boyfriend's back...not needing to check in all the time, like not calling each other every hour seeing if they doing the right thing.

Theme 2: Communication

"Communicating makes a relationship healthy because without communication, you can't tell what's wrong."

Communication was seen as a key component of a healthy dating relationship. Communication encompassed two sub-themes, Open-Easy Communication and Conflict Resolution. Collectively, these capture participants' perceptions that being able to talk with a dating partner and exchange ideas and perspectives (i.e., "likes and dislikes"), as well as share emotions, was critical to the sustainability of the relationship, particularly when problems or disagreements arise.

Sub-theme: Open-easy communication

Open-Easy Communication was the most frequently discussed quality of a healthy dating relationship and addresses qualities such as the ease and regularity of communication. Participants spoke in terms of "having a good talk", "talking is the main thing in a relationship", "value talking to partner" and "be able to tell me what you're thinking and what you're basing that on." Participants referenced multiple modes of communication, including cell phones, social media, texting and face to face exchanges. One teen put it this way: "...check in regularly, how was my day, did I have a good or bad day, you want to talk about it?" Participants used language such as "open to communicate", "neither is closed off", and "knowing how to give the right feedback" as they underscored the value of open, easy, and honest communication as qualities for a healthy dating relationship. Effective communication was also seen to facilitate tangible assistance, such as "helping out with personal problems" and/or provision of "emotional" support.

Sub-theme: Conflict resolution

Conflict Resolution, or communication in the context of dealing with relationship issues, was a recurrent theme and different elements of effective conflict resolution were identified. Participants noted that "being able to argue is healthy" and "if you don't talk about problems, won't be able to find solutions...otherwise, it will get worse." Others underscored the need to "express what bothers you." As two participants put it: "...if someone does something in a relationship that you don't like, definitely have a 'one-on-one' to talk about it" and "if you don't want to talk to me, tell me that." Recognition that relationships take effort, that problems are inevitable and need to be addressed, was verbalized: "...have to work at it, don't just give up on a relationship because things going wrong, compromise, do what each other likes." The critical need for communication to "resolve problems

in an effective way" was succinctly summed up as follows: "without communication wind up breaking up."

Theme 3: General connection/Compatibility

"Well, basically somebody who understands you."

General Connection/compatibility weaves an array of interconnected threads from participants' narratives that all address social utilities that were highly valued in dating relationships. It comprises three sub-themes, Smart and Independent, Emotional Connection/confidant, Physical Connection. The sub-themes reflect the forms and functionalities of a healthy dating relationship in terms of generalized connectivity and compatibility.

Sub-theme: Smart and independent

Smart and Independent was the 2nd most frequently discussed quality of a healthy dating relationship. Being "book smart", having "career goals", and "knowing oneself" and "not being dependent on anyone" were frequent characterizations. Participants uniformly expressed the desire for a dating partner who "has plans, high goals", "knows what she want out of life, wants to be somebody" "...has a career goal in mind." They referenced both work and academic pursuits, as in "will get a good job" or "go to college", and "Don't want to keep dumb chicks, dumb anything around you." The term "mature" was used in the context of, "knows what her goals are" and "knows how to act in public." In a healthy relationship their partner would be independent, "not needy"; "looking toward the future, not just now, know what need to do to continue the relationship" and "...need to know that although people are together they have to be independent", "can do her own thing, wouldn't need me." They wanted someone who was not afraid to stand up for herself: "don't take nothing from nobody", "not scared, don't fear no one."

Sub-Theme: Emotional connection/confidant

Emotional Connection/confidant addresses participant's references to both intimacy and empathy or understanding. The term 'understanding' had multiple characterizations, including: 1) having a "understanding... both can come and talk to each other"; 2) being understood as in, "[your] partner understands you- won't take things the wrong way" and "being able to figure out when someone has a problem, even without saying it"; 3) "...that you are special and not like anyone else." Participants spoke about how a girlfriend would "get who you are" and would share a "special connection", be supportive and both a source of "comfort" and "comfortable around each other, support... just be there" and "best friend." They did acknowledge how norms prevented them from expressing emotions to anyone except a girlfriend:

I know me and some of my friends we don't really talk about all our emotions to people. We don't even talk about it to ourselves. A girlfriend somebody you go out with, you go to them. They won't laugh at you or whatever. That's something you kinda need sometimes that you can escape with.

Sub-Theme: Physical connection

Participants were quite expressive that a physical connection- which included attractiveness, along with expressions of affection and sexual relations- was both valued and important. They spoke about "actually physically being together" as well as an "intimacy" and a "sexual"

connection. In terms of the initial attraction, participants were up front and honest in disclosing that physical attractiveness may be the initial lure. These two quotes are illustrative: "... how she looks initially attracts you, before even talking, to want to figure out their personality", "A lot of people say personality, but you don't know that when see someone walking down the street."

One participant did say that attractiveness was essential, "otherwise get old quick", suggesting its sustained importance.

Physical Connection was multi-faceted ranging from characterizations of physical appearance, "Good looking, gotta be bad, she gotta look real good" to "love and passion, you're everything." One participant described this connection as: "balance between communication and there has to be sex, relationships are healthy not because of sex but it make it better." Others, in referring to sex, contextualized it as "be able to have sex if both people are ready", "good sex, of course", and "good sex that comes naturally." Participants depicted sex as an expression of commitment: "Should be the one person you are willing to commit to, especially physically and be with me for the long run."

Theme 4: Respectful relationship

"Don't take nothing from nobody"

Respectful relationship captured participants' references to 'respect' in the context of the relationship dynamic, "neither party disrespects." Participants spoke about "not hitting each other", "not yelling", "not fighting or arguing" but rather "treating the person the way they want to be treated... treat her well and have respect for her." It also embodies participants' idea that a healthy dating partner was, "a female who takes pride in herself" has 'self-respect' and respects boundaries.

Sub-Theme: Balance and boundaries

Participants suggested that both balance and boundaries were requisite for a relationship to be healthy. That is, being totally exclusive and not being able to spend time with friends or pursuing other interests was seen as disrespectful and unhealthy. There was recognition that "sometimes gonna want some space...time to spend with guys or for her to spend with girls." This was viewed as "that's normal" and further characterized as "supporting each other... knowing when the other person needs to do something", "respecting each other's space." Participants spoke about a reciprocal relationship with "someone who's going to give equally, act as respectfully and mannerly as I do, and reciprocate."

Discussion

The lens of first personal narratives has the ability to confront conventional one-dimensional stereotypes of young Black males and functionally advance the reclamation of their personal integrity and worth [24]. This study challenged the existing paradigm by reframing the research around AA males' insights about healthy dating dynamics rather than presuming their propensity is toward violence perpetration and aggression. As noted by Parkes and Conolly [25]. "The child as law breaker appears much more often in news stories, typified by threatening, out of control behaviour, a menacing, knife-carrying 'hoody-wearer', most often a black young man."

Ease and regularity of communication was viewed as essential in building a healthy relationship and facilitating conflict resolution. In this study, participants were aware that effective communication

requires more than just willingness but also skills. While conflict resolution training is seen as an interpersonal violence prevention strategy, these dynamics have not been examined within the context of adolescent romantic relationships [26,27].

A respectful relationship also emerged as an important and multi-layered theme. AA adolescents must navigate the transition into adulthood within a sociocultural context where their achievement of positive cultural identity and self-respect is difficult [28]. Programs that are rooted in the lived experience of AA adolescent males and are centered on racial respect and racial socialization, show promise to promote prosocial coping strategies [28]. While interpersonal respect is considered an important quality in successful romantic relationships, it has received limited attention [12]. What research does exist suggests that respect is manifested in cognitive, emotional and behavioral ways that reflect qualities such as trustworthiness, caring, acceptance, and positive communication [12,29,30]. Interestingly, these qualities all materialized as interwoven threads or thematic elements, stitched together from the adolescents' narratives. Our findings not only address an existing gap but highlight, and expand upon, the importance and multiple meanings of respect in romantic relationships, particularly among AA males.

Males appeared cognizant of characteristics of unhealthy dating relationships and some forms of TDV, which include physical, emotional/psychological, sexual and stalking behaviors that are threatening, coercive, harassing and/or abusive [14]. When asked to address qualities of a healthy dating relationship males also focused on what would be incompatible with such a relationship. Issues of dishonesty, cheating, monitoring each other's whereabouts or activities and distrust were seen as undesirable, unwanted and harmful to the relationship. Males' displeasure with these dynamics underscored their distaste for controlling behavior, which they associated with a lack of trust and a form of disrespect.

Study Limitations

Study limitations include the small, convenience sample from one geographic locale. Despite this, use of qualitative methods facilitated directed probing which elicited multi-layered and nuanced characterizations of healthy dating dynamics. It is also unclear whether participants in the study would "own" the characterizations summarized in the Results, if they were presented to them as a means of reliability or validity testing. At the risk of being seen as weak or soft, males may be reluctant to endorse interpersonal or dating dynamics inconsistent with a tough or masculine image [31]. Indeed, the vulnerability of young males to feelings of disrespect or humiliation during adolescence or early adulthood has been associated with motivation for violence perpetration and/or retaliation [32]. Feelings of social ridicule or dishonor have been posited to explain why males may be more reluctant to report female to male TDV victimization [33]. These dynamics may be potent mediating factors.

Implications for Public Health Research and Programming

These narratives underscore the need to engage AA males in dialogue to understand the complexities surrounding adolescent dating. Youth must see that they are valued as producers of knowledge. Valuing their engagement in the process of knowledge generation may be an important first step toward validating their integrity. This is particularly important with marginalized or stereotyped populations

and can shed light on the structural underpinnings of behavior, ie perceptions, attitudes, values and norms [34,35]. A greater focus on positive youth development is warranted in both research and practice. This reframing is needed to counterbalance the persistent focus on negative dynamics within teen dating relationships that reinforce stereotypes that young minority males are bio-behaviorally prone to violence and aggression [15,36].

Conclusion

Adolescent minority males had a strong sense of healthy dating relationship characteristics. More needs to be learned about the socialization factors that shape males' perceptions and influence their dating dynamics. Programs of positive youth development should resonate with these powerful narratives and the lived experiences of adolescent males.

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