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African American College Students' Sexual Attitudes, Behaviors, and Beliefs

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Abstract

African American college students have among the highest levels of sexual activity, yet many African American college students are lacking knowledge and confidence in making informed decisions before engaging in a sexual activity. Previous studies noted that risky sexual behavior among college students and young adults remains a public health concern given the high percentage of unintended pregnancies in the U.S. and sexually transmitted diseases. The purpose of the research is to examine the sexual attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs of African American college men and women attending a higher education institution in a rural setting and understand what factors have impacted African American college students' sexual attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs. The researchers offer recommendations on how to engage and empower African American college students so that they can be more knowledgeable and confident in making informed decisions with their sexual attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs.

Keywords: African American college students; black students; sexual attitudes; behaviors; beliefs; sex

Introduction and Literature Review

When students enter college, many of them arrive on campus with newfound freedoms of making decisions without the oversight of, what many researchers refer to as, *loco parentis* (Hannon et al., 2010). *Loco parentis* is a Latin term that means "in the place of a parent" (Hannon et al., 2010, p. 66). It refers to "a legal relationship in which a temporary guardian or caretaker of a child takes on all or some of the responsibilities of a parent" (Garner, 2009, p. 858; Hannon et al, 2010). While all students experience freedoms associated with becoming a college student, research indicates that one of those freedoms is the right to make decisions regarding sexual attitudes and behaviors. Researchers suggest that the African American college students have among the highest levels of sexual activity (Lyttle et. al., 2018; Seth et al., 2011).

Even with this realization coupled with our nation becoming more diverse, in terms of race and ethnicity (Hunt, Layton, Prince, 2015; Peguero, 2011), it is quite surprising that research that explores sexual attitudes and behaviors by cultural backgrounds among college students is almost absent from the literature. The majority of the literature around sexual attitudes of college going students focuses specifically on STI/HIV (Calloway et al., 2014; McLaurin-Jones, 2017; Shegog et al., 2010). Very little research dives into the cultural attitudes, beliefs, influences, and behaviors around sexuality.

Risky sexual behavior among college students and young adults, remains a public health concern (Metzger et al., 2017), given the high percentage of unintended pregnancies in the U.S (Finer et al.,

2018) and sexually transmitted diseases (McLaurin-Jones et al., 2017). In fact, “researchers assert that college students are more likely to engage in high-risk sexual behavior, including sex with multiple partners and inconsistent use of condoms” (Johnson, 2017, p. 204; Synovitz et al., 2005). These attitudes may be driven, in part, by the varying attitudes and beliefs that exist among college students. Sexuality and attitudes toward sexuality are complex and are influenced by many external factors. More specifically, there are a number of reasons that African American college students may engage in sexual behaviors (Murray et al., 2011). While not a comprehensive list, these factors include, but are not limited to, peer influence, the media images and stereotypes about the hyper sexuality of African American men and the “portrayal of African American women as sexual objects” (Finer et al., 2018; Johnson, 2017, p. 204; Younge et al., 2013), and alcohol use (Cottonham, 2018; Cottonham et al., 2017).

Factors that impact sexual attitudes and behaviors

Peer influence and acceptance can also impact sexual attitudes and behaviors among college going African American females (Rouse-Arnett & Dilworth, 2006). Many college age students do not have formal education on sexual attitudes and behaviors. This lack of formal education may lead students to turn to their peers. The impact of peer influence may be due, in part, to a combination of discourse on sexuality being avoided in the family (Fletcher et al., 2015; Hall & Witherspoon, 2015; Rouse-Arnett & Dilworth, 2006), parental discomfort with engaging their college age students on sexuality and sexual attitudes conversations (Duckworth & Trautner, 2019; Rouse-Arnett & Dilworth, 2006), coupled with college students feeling more comfortable in discussions with their peers about sexuality (Duckworth & Trautner, 2019; Rouse-Arnett & Dilworth, 2006). Television and media exposure can have both positive and negative influences on sexual behavior. For example, African American youth who view television programming identifying sexual risks and safety were less likely to initiate intercourse in the subsequent year. However, a high rate of viewing sexual content on television hastened subsequent sexual initiation (Collins et al., 2004). For some college students, viewing sexual behaviors in the media can decrease the desire for students to want to engage in such activities; however, for other students, the viewing can increase their desire to engage in sexual activity. Lastly, not surprisingly, there exists a high relationship among excessive alcohol use and sexual attitudes and behaviors. According to Randolph and colleagues (2009), “alcohol use has been associated with sexual risk behavior, a relationship that is frequently mediated by alcohol expectancies” (p. 80, para. 3). On average, while men consume more alcohol than women, the consequences among the genders are just as dire (Jones et al., 2000; Palfai & Ostanfin, 2003; Weitzman, 2004).

The role of college

The literature highlights the essential role of colleges and universities in aiding in the education of college age students on sexual attitudes and behaviors and ways to protect themselves. Sexuality education programs are highlighted throughout the literature as an effective way to educate students. According to Synovitz et al. (2002), “sexuality education aids young people in understanding a positive view of sexuality and helps them make responsible decisions regarding their sexual health (p.165). Colleges and universities can also begin changing the narrative around sex and sexual behaviors. It is plausible to believe that

sexual attitudes are going to exist on college campuses. Colleges and universities must find ways to incorporate discourse into common practices and continue to provide sexual education courses and programs to college students, in an effort to normalize discourse on sexual attitudes and behaviors. Additionally, research that explores cultural differences among college students is necessary in ensuring that initiatives are relevant and appropriate.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to examine the sexual attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs of African American college men and women attending a higher education institution. This article concludes with recommendations for institutional leaders and advocates to consider when engaging in strategies and initiatives for empowering African American men and women with the knowledge, and confidence needed to make informed decisions about their sexual attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs.

Methodology

The participants of the study are undergraduate and graduate African American students (men and women) enrolled at a four-year public higher education institution located in a rural area in the state of Texas. An online research survey consisting of 23 close-ended questions was designed using Qualtrics. The participants were given five Likert-scale responses for each question, 1= strongly disagree with the statement, 2= moderately disagree with the statement, 3= neutral, 4= moderately agree with the statement, and 5= strongly agree with the statement. The research was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the institution. A total of 98 responses were collected. From the 98 responses, 97 (99%) responses met the research criteria and one response was dropped due to missing information. The data was imported to IBM SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software for descriptive analysis.

Findings

Table 1 summarizes the mean and standard deviation of the participants’ responses for all 23 survey questions. The results of the study show that the surveyed participants are less interested in engaging in sexual relationships with multiple partners or random hook-ups. For example, the mean score for the following three statements: “I would like to have sex with many partner”, “It is okay to have ongoing sexual relationship with more than one person at a time”, and “The best sex is with no strings attached” are below 2.00, which means they are leaning towards the strongly disagree scale. On the contrary, the results also show that the participants agree on the importance of birth control should they engage in any types of sexual behaviors. The mean score for all three statements: “Birth control is part of responsible sexuality”, “A woman should share responsibility for birth control”, and “A man should share responsibility for birth control” are above 4.00, which is leaning towards the strongly agree scale.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistic of Participants’ Responses (n=97)

Question	Mean	Standard Deviation
Sex is primarily physical	2.61	1.319
Sex is primarily a bodily function, like eating	2.23	1.095
Sex is a very important part of life	3.72	1.205

Sex is usually an intensive almost overwhelming experience	3.38	1.094
Sex is best when you let yourself go and focus on your own pleasure	2.93	1.309
Sex is primarily the taking of pleasure from another person	2.49	1.081
The main purpose of sex is to enjoy oneself	2.88	1.292
Casual sex is acceptable	2.90	1.468
I do not need to be committed to a person to have sex with him or her	2.60	1.470
I would like to have sex with many partners	1.43	0.815
One-night stands are sometimes very enjoyable	2.38	1.254
Sex as a simple exchange of favors is okay if both people agree to it	2.23	1.433
It is okay to have ongoing sexual relationship with more than one person at a time	1.57	1.079
Life would have fewer problems if people could have sex more freely	2.07	1.192
It is possible to enjoy sex with a person and not like that person very much	2.45	1.369
The best sex is with no strings attached	1.88	1.139
It is okay for sex to be just good physical release	3.15	1.453
Sex is the closest form of communication between two people	2.91	1.487
A sexual encounter between two people deeply in love is the ultimate human interaction	3.89	1.224
At its best, sex seems to be the merging of two souls	4.01	1.177
Birth control is part of responsible sexuality	4.33	1.188
A woman should share responsibility for birth control	4.27	1.138
A man should share responsibility for birth control	4.25	1.191

While sexual activities are common practices among college students, African American college students may have different attitudes and beliefs towards sex. The majority (52.6% and 62.9%) of the participants in this study disagree that sex is solely physical or bodily function (see Table 2). A total of 29.9% of the participants (moderately agree and strongly agree) view sex primarily as a physical activity and 13.4% view sex as a primarily bodily function, like eating.

Table 2. Participants' Responses on The Definition of Sex (in percentage, %)

Response	Sex is primarily physical	Sex is primarily a bodily function, like eating
Strongly disagree	25.8	30.9
Moderately disagree	26.8	32.0
Neutral	17.5	23.7
Moderately agree	20.6	10.3
Strongly agree	9.3	3.1

When the participants were asked about their beliefs on the importance of sex in life, over half (66%) of the participants responded that sex is indeed a very important part of their life whereas 15.4% disagree and 18.6% reported neutral responses. A total of 46.4% of the participants added that sex is an intensive and almost overwhelming experience for them while 18.6% disagree (see Table 3).

Table 3. Participants' Responses on The Importance of Sex (in percentage, %)

Response	Sex is very important part of life	Sex is usually an intensive almost overwhelming experience
Strongly disagree	8.2	6.2
Moderately disagree	7.2	12.4
Neutral	18.6	35.1
Moderately agree	36.1	29.9
Strongly agree	29.9	16.4

The findings of the study revealed that 32% of the participants believe that sex is best when they let themselves go and try to focus on their pleasure even though the majority of the participants (36.1%) disagree. Almost half of the participants (47.4%) also disagree that sex is about taking pleasure from another person. When the participants were asked whether the main purpose of sex is to enjoy oneself, the participants who agree and disagree on this statement are tied at 36.5% (see Table 4).

Table 4. Participants' Responses on Sexual Pleasure (in percentage, %)

Response	Sex is the best when you let yourself go and focus on your own pleasure	Sex is primarily the taking of pleasure from	The main purpose of sex is to enjoy oneself

		another person	
Strongly disagree	18.6	23.7	21.6
Moderately disagree	17.5	23.7	14.4
Neutral	32.0	33.0	26.8
Moderately agree	16.5	18.6	26.8
Strongly agree	15.5	1.0	9.3

College students have different attitudes and perspectives about sex. Among the 97 participants who responded to the survey, 68.1% and 70.1% of the participants believe that a sexual encounter that takes place between two people who are deeply in love is the ultimate human interaction, and that sex seems to be the merging of two souls. Surprisingly, only 38.1% believe that sex is the closest form of communication between two people. On the contrary, less than 20% of the participants disagree on the first two statements, and over 40% disagree on the last statement (see Table 5).

Table 5. Participants' Responses on Their Beliefs of Sex (in percentage, %)

Response	A sexual encounter between two people deeply in love is the ultimate human interaction	At its best, sex seems to be the merging of two souls	Sex is the closest form of communication between two people
Strongly disagree	5.2	5.2	25.8
Moderately disagree	11.3	6.2	16.5
Neutral	15.5	18.6	19.6
Moderately agree	25.8	22.7	17.5
Strongly agree	42.3	47.4	20.6

Table 6 summarizes the participants' viewpoints of sex and sexual relationships. Less than half (41.2%) of the participants disagree that casual sex is acceptable, but 43.3% of the participants have a different viewpoint and believe that casual sex is acceptable. Even though the majority of the participants believed that it is fine to have casual sex, the participants seem to uphold certain expectations when it comes to sexual relationships. For example, 52.6% of them believe that they should be committed to the other person when having sex with him/her, whereas only 31.9% of the participants disagree. Also, 85.6% of the participants would rather not have sex with many partners. The African American college students who responded to the survey prefer more monogamous

sexual relationships as 82.5% of them prefer not to have ongoing sexual relationships with more than one person at a time. When the participants were asked whether one-night stands are sometimes enjoyable for them, 37.1% strongly disagree, and 10.3% moderately disagree. Only a total of 16.5% of participants moderately and strongly agree that one-night stands can sometimes be enjoyable.

Table 6. Participants' Responses on Their Expectation of Sex (in percentage, %)

Response	Casual sex is acceptable	I don't need to be committed to have sex with him/her	I would like to have sex with many partners	One-night stands are sometimes very enjoyable	It is okay to have ongoing sexual relationship with more than one person at a time
Strongly disagree	27.8	34.0	74.2	37.1	73.2
Moderately disagree	13.4	18.6	11.3	10.3	9.3
Neutral	15.5	15.5	11.3	36.1	8.2
Moderately agree	27.8	17.5	3.1	10.3	3.1
Strongly agree	15.5	14.4	-	6.2	6.2

Every college student has his/her personal attitudes about sex. Less than half (22.7%) of the surveyed participants view sex as a simple exchange of favors granted by both individuals who agree to it. However, 60.8% of them disagree. Despite the more conservative viewpoint the participants have shared about sexual activity, almost 50% of the participants did view sex as a good physical release (47.4%); 21.6% did not have a strong opinion on this, and 30.9% did disagree with it. A small percentage (13.4%) of the participants also think that life would have fewer problems if people could have sex more freely, although most participants (61.8%) think differently (see Table 7). Over half of the participants also unanimously disagree on the statements "best sex is with no strings attached" (68%) and "it is possible to enjoy sex with a person and not like that person very much" (52.5%) (see Table 8).

Table 7. Participants' Responses on Their Viewpoints of Sex (in percentage, %)

Response	Sex as a simple exchange of favors is okay if both people agree to it	It is okay for sex to be just good physical exercise	Life would have fewer problems if people could have sex more freely
Strongly	49.5	22.7	47.4

disagree			
Moderately disagree	11.3	8.2	14.4
Neutral	16.5	21.6	24.7
Moderately agree	12.4	25.8	10.3
Strongly agree	10.3	21.6	3.1

Table 8. Participants' Responses on Their Belief of The Best Sex (in percentage, %)

Response	The best sex is with no strings attached	It is possible to enjoy sex with a person and not like that person very much
Strongly disagree	56.7	38.1
Moderately disagree	11.3	14.4
Neutral	21.6	17.5
Moderately agree	8.2	23.7
Strongly agree	2.1	6.2

The findings also revealed that 80.4% of the participants agree that they need to be more responsible when they are sexually active. More than half (80.4%) of the participants believed that they need to take precautions such as birth control. A large percentage (77%) agree that women should share responsibility for birth control and 75.2% of the participants also think that men should share responsibility, too, when it comes to birth control (see Table 9).

Table 9. Participants' Responses on Their Belief towards Birth Control (in percentage, %)

Response	Birth control is part of responsible sexuality	A woman should share responsibility for birth control.	A man should share responsibility for birth control
Strongly disagree	6.2	4.1	5.2
Moderately disagree	4.1	5.2	5.2
Neutral	9.3	13.4	14.4
Moderately agree	11.3	13.4	10.3
Strongly agree	69.1	62.9	64.9

Discussion

Research shows that African American college students are sexually active in college and university campuses (Lyttle et al., 2018; Seth et al., 2011). However, the results of this study reveal that African American college students have more reserved attitudes and beliefs about sex. Perhaps, this is due to the influence of the geographical location of the institution. Given the institution

is located in a more rural setting in the state of Texas, the participants might have come from a more traditional and conservative family background. It is possible that sex education conversations are taboos in the household; therefore, the participants have limited and reserved attitudes and beliefs about sex. It is also possible that their parents uphold more conservative values and teaching about sex in their household and it has indirectly influenced the participants' attitudes and beliefs about sex.

Previous study shows that African Americans ethnic group is ranked the top with HIV/STD/STI infections (HIV.gov, n.d.). The US Census Bureau data shows that there were 13.4% of African Americans residing in the U.S. in 2019, and 40.3% of this population were infected with HIV (HIV.gov, n.d.). The report also reveals that African American women are disproportionately affected by HIV as compared to other ethnic minorities. This is because the African American population has a higher rate of HIV in their communities (HIV.gov, n.d.). Duncan et al.'s study (2002) shows that African American college students are projected to be the next group to be affected by the HIV epidemic. Therefore, having a deeper understanding on the attitudes and beliefs of African American college students is crucial to address this issue in the long run.

Even though more participants in the study reported that casual sex is fine, yet they believe that sex is more than solely a physical release or a physical activity between two individuals who agree on it. It is possible that the participants are influenced by their faith and religiosity given predominate African Americans in the U.S. practice the Christianity religion. Many of the faith-based communities including churches offer abstinence-only-until-marriage education (AOE) to their congregation (Breunig, 2017). Additionally, faith-based leaders emphasize the importance of AOE and sexual purity for African American adolescents and young adults (Stewart, 2014). This might have impacted the participants' attitudes and beliefs about sexual behaviors. Previous research also asserts that the increase of spirituality of African American women has decreased the odds of African American women from practicing vaginal sex without using a condom (Lyttle et al., 2018).

The other possible factor would be the influence of their cultural backgrounds. Traditionally, African Americans have developed a sense of respect to their elderly (parents and grandparents) and women. African American women are responsible for transferring cultural knowledge and values about sex to their children, especially their daughters (L'Engle & Jackson, 2008; Shambley-Ebron et al., 2016). Most importantly, the African American mothers are also responsible in protecting their children from exposure to sex-filled media and discouraging them from pregnancy (Smith, 2018). Research shows that African American mothers who are more involved in their children's lives are more supportive of their children's healthy development (Tabi, 2002). This includes educating and having dialogues with their children about sexual education. This may have explained why the surveyed participants prefer not to have sex with multiple partners or hook-up with people whom they don't like very much. Additionally, it may explain why most of the participants are in support of men and women taking responsibility in birth control should they engage in sexual behaviors.

Despite the findings of this study showing that African American college students have more reserved attitudes and beliefs about sex,

the findings did reveal that about 20+ participants (approximately 20%) remained neutral when they were asked about the purpose and reason of engaging in sexual behaviors. As it is shared in the literature previously, it is possible this group of participants do not have a strong viewpoint or stand on sexual behaviors or they are lacking formal education on sexual attitudes and behaviors (Rouse-Arnett & Dilworth, 2006).

Conclusion

African American college students are actively engaged in sexual behaviors in college and university campuses due to different influences, such as peer pressure, influence of the media and social media, and alcohol use. These may have indirectly influenced their attitudes and beliefs about sex. This study reveals that African American college students have more reserved attitudes and beliefs about sexual behaviors. It is possible that the location of the institution, the cultural values of African American families, and the role of African American mothers, have influenced their attitudes and beliefs about sex. They view sex more than just a physical activity or one-night stand and they would prefer a monogamous sexual relationship. Most importantly, they believe that men and women are responsible for birth control should they engage in any sexual behaviors.

Recommendations

Previous research reveals that African American college students are sexually active on campus. Even though the study shows that African American college students generally have more reserved attitudes and beliefs about sexual behaviors, the researchers see the needs of higher education administrators taking a more proactive approach in serving their students. The findings of this study suggest several recommendations. First, the institutional administrators can consider developing and offering formalized sexual education courses to all freshmen. Second, administrators can work collaboratively with Student Affairs offices (e.g., Student Life, Counseling, Health Clinic) to promote programming that allow students to have a safe space to engage in healthy sexual conversations. Third, administrators can provide sexual education training to faculty and staff so that they are aware of the resources and support services that are in place for the students.

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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