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Sara Tildon Burton
Sexual Expression among Black
Women in Relationships with
Men from Different Minority
Racial Groups

ABSTRACT

This research was a qualitative study designed to investigate the expression of Black woman in relationships with males from different racial minority groups. The primary objective was to learn more about how Black women express their sexuality in interracial relationships with their partners. This study interviewed a group of Black women (n=10) within interracial relationships and explored their experiences of expressing their sexuality within these relationships both psychologically and physically (Bean, 2002). Through their narratives, participants were able to convey the impact of their partner's racial and/or cultural background on their sexual expression. The majority of these participants (n=7) would continue to date interracially, but they did bring up a number of issues that were challenging. One issue was the importance of communication within these relationships, where participants discussed the importance of having an open dialogue with their partner about their sexual, occupational, familial, and racial experiences. Looking specifically at sexuality in the context of race, the majority (n=8) of the participants had a positive view of sexual expression among Black women in relationships. Participants reported that generally Black sexual expression was characterized by "strength", "direction", and the pride of dressing their bodies. These findings are useful to clinical social workers who have clients in interracial relationships and may be struggling with issues of race and sexuality.

SEXUAL EXPRESSION AMONG BLACK WOMEN IN RELATIONSHIPS WITH
MEN FROM DIFFERENT MINORITY RACIAL GROUPS

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2008

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis could not have been accomplished without the assistance of a number of people whose contributions are appreciatively acknowledged.

I would like to thank David Burton for his assistance in helping me develop a research topic and my study objectives; my research advisor; Dr. Jennifer Perloff, for her guidance and confidence for which my thesis would not have been finished; a fellow colleague, LaVange Barth, who helped me format this document- thank you; my family, whose support and faith has helped me throughout my thesis; and Brooke Burton for her insightful advice.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

While the expression of sexuality varies greatly by culture, region, and historical period. In almost any historic culture, the arts, including literary and visual arts, as well as popular culture, present a substantial portion of a given society's views on sexuality. Given these influences on sexuality, what happens to one's expression of sexuality when an individual is involved with someone from a different racial and/or cultural background? More specifically, do Black women experience their sexuality differently with male counterparts from a different racial background? Moreover, how are differences in sexual expression manifested in these relationships? These are some questions that I hope to answer and I feel are significant for women from minority racial groups, who are grappling with expressing their sexuality and maintaining healthy relationships with their partners.

Using the centrality of race within the context of interracial relationships, there has been little research to determine how race influences sexual expression among Black women in relationships with men from a different minority racial group. The research available on interracial relationships amongst minorities is centered on minority relationships with Caucasians. Additionally, there is some research available concerning interracial relationships and their connection to one's racial identity as well as the external factors, such as family and society, which have been cited as primary variables in the involvement in interracial romantic relationships (Yancy, 1998; Samuals, 1997; Vaquera

and Kao, 2005). In general, the little research that is out there does not study the racial differences amongst minorities in these interracial relationships and is not generalizable to the larger society (Yancy, 1998). Part of the purpose of my study was to explore racial identity theory, and to understand how Black women overcome society's negative evaluation of their group within the context of interracial dating (Helms 1994).

This research study was designed to investigate the expression of Black woman in relationships with males from different racial minority groups. The primary objective was to learn more about how Black women express their sexuality in relationships with their partners. This study has interviewed a group of Black women (n=10) within these interracial relationships and explored their experiences of expressing their sexuality within these relationships psychologically and physically (Bean, 2002). Through the narratives of their experiences, participants were able to convey the impact of their partners racial and/or cultural background on their sexual expression. Participants were also able to convey other concepts, like gender, that have impacted their expression of their sexuality within these relationships.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several researchers have evaluated structural factors that are associated with the complexities of interracial dating. However, much of the literature is drawn from the study of interracial relationships between minority females and Caucasian males in interracial relationships. The following literature review will address interracial relationship with the literature that is available. The information will be presented from general materials on interracial dating to racial identity and female sexuality formation. For the purposes of this study, the first section will provide theories on psychological and sociopolitical constructs that influence interracial dating. The second section will present the constructs of racial identity in minority populations as well as racial identity theory. The third section will address Black sexuality, as a manifestation strongly connected to historic and Sociocultural constructs.

Theorizing Interracial Dating

Research shows that attitudes toward interracial dating are complex. However, a number of authors have sought to examine the motivating factors for involvement in interracial relationships (Harris and Kalbfleish 2002; Kohatsu et al.2000; Yancey 1998; Samuel 1997). Kalbfleish and Harris (2002) used the structural theory and the racial motivation theory to better understand these motivations. The structural theory posits that demographics (i.e., socioeconomic status, education, occupation, residence) and mutual attraction contribute to the initiation, development, and maintenance of an interracial

marriage (Harris and Kalbfleish 2002). Equally, the racial motivation theory hypothesizes that interracial marriages occur because of racial difference, whereby at least one partner sees the racially different other more appealing because of her or his race (Harris and Kalbfleish 2002).

Using racial motivation theory, Harris and Kalbfleish (2002) found in a quantitative study of 120 participants that individuals seemed to exoticize the other race because their external beauty and skin color. These are reportedly the primary factors contributing to perceptions of attractiveness and the (interracial) mate selection experience. Harris and Kalbfleish (2002) also found that partners were attracted to their mates for intrinsic reasons as well as physical attraction; however, partner physical attractiveness for both races outweighed other criteria for mate selection. For example, female minority partners thought to be more attractive than their male European American partner. Additionally, individuals involved in interracial romantic relationships are sometimes forced to “normalize” the relationship and justify its existence to themselves, family, and a race-consumed society (Harris and Kalbfleish 2002; Kohatsu et al.2000; Yancey 1998; Samuel 1997).

This concern is behaviorally manifested when partners choose a racially different partner whose physical beauty compensates for the “racial disparity” in the relationship (Harris and Kalbfleish 2002). Vaquera and Kao (2005) investigated interracial dating through the lens of stigma management theories. The theoretical approach emphasizes how context and outside influences affect the dynamic between dyads, which could account for a person choosing a partner from a different race whom they find more aesthetically pleasing than themselves (Vaquera and Kao 2005). Additionally, individuals

involved in interracial relationships may use techniques to avoid stigmatization when in public, such as avoiding letting others know about their partner, not introducing him or her to their parents, or not holding hand in public (Vaquera and Kao 2005). Studies, like Vaquera and Kao (2005), show the idea that individuals treat people of their own race differently, where there is no stigmatized behaviors, than people from other races. This is due in part to in-group preferences or issues of social acceptance (Vaquera and Kao 2005; Kohatsu et al. 2000).

Blackness and Sexuality

Looking at the literature on Black women's sexuality, it encompasses the effects of economics, history, and life experience on sexual development. Notably, gender role expectations are constructed and developed in their social settings from childhood, through many messages from home and school that reinforce gendered expectations (Mitchem, 2004; Mitchell, 1999; Rouse-Arnett & Dilworth, 2006; Weekes, 2002). According to Mitchem (2004), "the truth of sexuality may or may not stand in the comfortable conformity with those expectations, social expectations that bend us into shapes that do not fit." For Black women, realities of sexuality must include those things that shape us, for good or for bad.

In Dilworth and Rouse-Arnett's (2006) research, they did a qualitative study of 9 participants using focus groups to examine how African American women's sexual values and attitudes were shaped by their experiences with parental, peer, and cultural influences. Looking at parental influence, parents initiate children's education about sexuality in the first few months of life by laying down the foundation for gender identity development and gender appropriate behavior (Dilworth & Rouse-Arnett, 2006). Parental

attitudes about touching, nudity, and displays of affection are communicated to children at age three or four (Dilworth & Rouse-Arnett, 2006). When discussing or approaching the topic of sex, children are very attuned to parental discomfort, which can communicate shame about sexuality (Dilworth & Rouse-Arnett, 2006). For women, the mother is mostly likely to be the primary sex educator in the family, as well as the most influential in a child deciding to abstain or engage in sexual activity (Dilworth & Rouse-Arnett, 2006).

According to Dilworth and Rouse-Arnett (2006), the second most influential component on sexual development for African American women is peer influence. As children grow to become teenager, peer approval is very instrumental on sexual attitudes and behaviors. Peers groups that discuss sexual topics more have an increased likelihood of becoming sexual active earlier (Dilworth & Rouse-Arnett, 2006). Additionally, if a teenager's friends are having sex or using contraceptives then the teenager is more likely to follow the same behavior. Moreover, the third most influential factor in African American sexual development is the media. To begin, the media promotes unrealistic standard of beauty that contribute to how women experience and define their sexuality (Dilworth & Rouse-Arnett, 2006, 2006; Mitchem, 2004; Mitchell, 1999; Weekes, 2002). When looking at music videos, females are very likely to be dressed provocatively and to be targets of aggression. These images found on the television are creating negative stereotypical messages, endorsing promiscuity or hastened sexual activity (Dilworth & Rouse-Arnett, 2006).

One of the main pressures that influences Black women's sexual expression is a negative social view of themselves, where they desire to produce a "good" appearance to

obtain or portray the ideal look (Mitchem, 2004; Mitchell, 1999; Weekes, 2002). The maintenance of a correct image is linked to trying to escape ridicule from others by more often than not trying to conform to a certain style of dress (Mitchem, 2004). Clothing is specifically relevant to the conformity of style, where often if one is unable to maintain the cost of these images, they are labeled “poor dressers” (Mitchem, 2004). Additionally getting hair and nails professionally done has become apart of a dress code for young Black women, revolving around looks (Mitchem, 2004). For Black women, the judgment of femininity is heavily tied to physical appearance.

Additionally, these perceptions, which shape Black sexuality, are forms of sexual violence (Mitchem, 2004; Mitchell, 1999; Weekes, 2002). The sexual experience of Black women is shaped by historically developed ideas that continue into the present. Black women are depicted as sexual adventurers, unable to control their libidinous drives (Mitchem, 2004; Mitchell, 1999; Weekes, 2002). These ideas are ingrained in American society and as a result have caused Black women to buy into them. Black feminist Tricia Rose (2003) highlighted contemporary, intensive, economic reinforcement of their sexual stereotypes.

Since the 1990s, after black popular culture emerged as the defining and profitable element in American Youth culture, the visual exploitation of black women in music, video and film skyrocketed along with black music profits. For many black women artists---and women artist generally---being sexually explicit in ways that mirror trite patriarchal sexual fantasies has remained the most reliably profitable motif. This exploitation by female black performers simply represents the music and film industry’s profiting from the long-standing sexual ideas about black women...it does not represent, as some have argued, a new black feminism...Many very sexually explicit artists, such as Lil’Kim, Trina, and Fox Brown, reinforced both the history of black women’s sexuality as deviant and the primary role of black women in male hip-hop music videos as exotic sexual playthings and strip-club dancers (Rose, 2003; p. 390).

The images of sexual violence are reinforced through music videos, hip-hop, Black male and Black female artists. The images are also reinforced through pornography, where black women are shown as beasts or as slaves (Mitchem, 2004; Rose 2003). More over the treatment of black women as “hoochie mamas” or whores is an extension of the belief that Black women want sexual activity, which includes the belief that rough and painful intercourse is preferred (Mitchem, 2004; Rose, 2003; Stephen & Phillips, 2003; Stephen & Phillips, 2005).

Furthermore, in an article by Stephens and Philips (2003), they explored the development of a sexual self in African American women. They believed that the sexual self is based on an understanding of the messages and meanings an individual was given about sexual roles and behaviors within a racialized and sexualized sociohistorical context (Stephens & Philips, 2003). That is to say, beliefs and attitudes about African American sexuality has appeared to be sanctioned by a culture that continues to embrace stereotypes about race and sexuality. This has been made apparent in media models available to African American women, where negative stereotypes have changed little over time (Stephen & Philips, 2003; Stephen & Philips, 2005; Mitchem, 2004). Stephens and Philips (2003) focused on sexual scripting processes as means to build a paradigm for research on human sexuality issues within the population of African American women. Sexual scripting can be defined as learned and acted behaviors through sexual messaging that takes place within cultural and social contexts (Longmore, 1998).

More specifically, Stephens and Philips (2003) looked at the following sexual scripts for African American women. The first is the *Diva* script, which refers to women who have sex to heighten their social status, although they may have financial status

(independent, middle class, or above). The *Gold Digger* script refers to women who have sex for increased financial status or gifts. The *Freak* script refers to women who have “wild and kinky” sex with many partners for their own gratification. The *Dyke* script for women who have rejected sex with men and are more masculine. The *Gangsta Bitch* script refers to women who are “street” and have sex to show solidarity with men in gangs. Next was the *Sister Savior* script with refers to women that saves her sexual intercourse for marriage or procreation. The *Earth Mother* script refers to women who have sex for spiritual or nationalistic causes to show support for their “race” or their “nation”. Finally, the *Baby Mama* script women who have a child with a man, but is not his partner; she has sex to maintain a financial or emotional connection to the man through the child (Stephens & Philips, 2003).

These eight sexual scripts were found in Stephen’s (2004) exploratory study on sexual scripts among African American adolescents and young adults. Based on this study, these scripts shaped the beliefs and attitudes about sexuality among Stephens (2003) participants that are unique in the ways that gender and racial stereotypes are integrated into the understanding of African American adolescent female sexuality within the context of hip hop culture.

While stereotypical associations of Blackness with sexuality are highly visible; Weekes (2002) and Rose (1990) said that silence continues to take part in the nature and expression of Black female sexuality. More specifically, Weekes (2002) said that Black women, attractiveness, sexual experience/knowledge and the need to simultaneously resist male desire to remain respectable creates a sense of sexual allure, which are all framed within the discourse of race. Durik, Hyde, Marks, Roy, Anaya, & Schultz (2006)

found in a quantitative study of 104 participants, in contradiction to Weekes, that Black females were expected to show more sexual interest in their partner than were men. Durik et al. (2006) said this expectation maybe due to the belief that Black females are thought to be more active in multiple life roles, i.e. family, and education. Durik et al (2006) also expressed that gender differences in expressing interest has not been studied, but their research indicated a strong difference between European American women and African American women. However according to a quantitative study of 3,432 participants by Gonzales and Rolison (2005), they found that Black women in comparison to White females, White males, and Black men are the most sexually repressed, where they are more likely to report that sex is unpleasant, lack sexual interest, as well as have orgasm difficulty.

The body of work on sexuality among black women shows the lack of understanding and insight into how Black women experience and intimately express their sexuality with their partner.

Racial Identity

Using Miller and Garran (2007) as a primary reference, all racial and ethnic identities map out phases or stages that a person of develops. When defining these stages, there are four major phase: initial, transition, intermediate, and final. The initial phase is defined as a stage the adolescents has not yet reflected on the meaning of their ethnicity/race in society for themselves. The second phase is transition where there is a critical evaluation, a period of transition, which is often precipitated by a crisis or intense encounter that causes emotional distress or cognitive confusion. Then there is the intermediate phase, which is characterized by “exploration” of a new identity and

wanting to be with people or groups or culture that reflect ones new identity and avoids painful encounters with those who are different by creating avoidant or buffering maneuvers. Lastly, in the final phase, the individual internalizes and establishes a positive and adaptive identity and a means of functioning within the dominate culture. These phases are an infusion of multiple theories regarding racial identity but hold the common themes within the literature of racial identity formation.

When looking specifically at racial identity formation, the theory examines the extent to which a person of color perceives himself or herself to share a common racial heritage with his or her respective socioracial group (Kohatsu et al 2000; Miller and Garran 2007). Briefly, racial identity development is a process by which members of an oppressed group “overcome society’s negative evaluation of their group and develop an identity with its roots in the culture and sociopolitical experiences of their prescribed group” (Helms 1994). A critical component of racial identity is understanding the process by which people of color overcome internalized racial stereotypes and negative self- and own group perceptions (Kohatsu et al 2000; Miller and Garran 2007). Additionally, a quantitative study of 160 participants completed by Kohatsu et al. 2000 examined racial identity attitudes as predictors of racial mistrust between Asian Americans and African Americans. Kohatsu and colleagues (2000) wanted to investigate the extent to which racial identity attitudes can predict the quality of racial contact in terms of behavioral, affective, and attitudinal variables as well as whether contact was an indicator of interpersonal racism and more negative quality of contact with African Americans.

Furthermore, looking at the social identity theory, it suggests that more the more strongly individuals identify with their group, the less favorable attitudes they hold

toward dissimilar groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). However, multicultural theory suggests the opposite. It says that affirmation towards one's group, particularly with ethnicity, should correspond with high levels of acceptance towards dissimilar groups (Phinney, 1996). In a quantitative study of 486 participants, Negy, Shreve, Jensen, and Uddin (2003) explored these two theories with non-Hispanic White, African American, and Hispanic/Latino university students to determine if support would be found for either theory. Negy, Shreve, Jensen, and Uddin (2003) found that Whites and Hispanics were consistent with social identity theory, where levels of ethnic identity correlated significantly with levels of ethnocentrism. This means that individuals with higher levels of in-group bias are more negative toward members of other ethnic groups. However, for African Americans, they obtained significantly higher ethnic identity and self-esteem scores than the other two groups, but was not compatible with the multicultural theory (Negy, Shreve, Jensen, & Uddin, 2003). The results of this study highlighted the complexities inherent to examining ethnic identity, ethnocentrism, and self-esteem. It also highlights the importance of further research that needs to be done to understand human development, racial and ethnic identity.

In a quantitative study of 201 participants, Cokley (2005) explored the extent to which Black racialized identity attitudes were related to ethnic identity and Afrocentric cultural values. The participants, in this study, attended a predominantly White university or a historically Black university and completed the Cross Racial Identity Scale, the Natanolitization Scale, the Multi Group Ethnic Identity Measure and the Africentrism Scale. Cokley (2005) had two significant findings. The first was that Afrocentric values and positive ethnic identity was negatively related to a racialized identity, which was

labeled a Nonracialized Ethnic Identity. Nonracialized Ethnic Identity was defined as an endorsement of Afrocentric values, negative endorsement of internalized racism, and an absence of anti-White attitudes (Cokley, 2005). Second, Cokley (2005) found that the endorsement of internalization Afrocentric attitudes/beliefs was positively related to a racialized ethnic identity, which is characterized by anti-White attitudes, beliefs about Afrocentrism, a belief in the natural ability of Blacks, a strong ethnic identity, and negative endorsement of multiculturalists inclusive attitudes. Cokley (2005) indicated that attitudes associated with having a strong ethnic identity are differently related to racialized identity, such that ethnic identity may be based on racialized beliefs or may be inversely related to racialized beliefs. Additionally, Cokley (2005) found that for some ethnic African Americans having a strong African American ethnic identity is the same as a strong Black racial identity.

The research explored here provides evidence that interracial dating among minorities is a barometer of race relations (Yancey 1998; Kohatsu, E., Dulay, M., Lam, C., Concepcion, W., Perez, P., Lopez, C., & Euler, J. 2000; Scott 1987). More specifically, Black women have gone through some form of racial development where their perception of their partner and themselves in relation to race must be examined in order to understand their sexual expression in an interracial relationship. This framework leads to a number of questions: How do racial identities influence women's sexual development in heterosexual relationships with other racial minority men? How do Black women within relationships with other minority males negotiate the benefits and drawbacks to being in interracial relationship? In addition, how does the perspective of race and interracial relationships influence or affect sexuality among women within these

relationships? Because there is limited research on the correlations between these variable, this study hopes to examine interracial relationships from the perspective of Black women in relationships with minority men from different racial groups.

Problem Formulation

In reviewing the literature related to sexuality and interracial couples, it is important to note that there is a substantial lack of empirical findings that explore the sexuality of minority women. Consequently, the intent of the present project is to use qualitative research methodology to gain a broader understanding of how sexual expression manifests itself in minority women in relationships with males from other minority racial groups. A qualitative methodology was chosen for two reasons: (a) a qualitative analysis will allow for a richer (and broader) understanding of a little-known area; and (b) qualitative analysis would allow be more sensitive to exploring issues of race and sexuality. Moreover, women who are experiencing race as having a significant impact on the expression of their sexuality with their partner will help educate theorists and others regarding sexuality among minority women in relationships with minority men in different racial groups. The question being explored within is this study is: How do interracial relationships with men from different minority racial groups affect Black women's sexual expression? Given the nature of this study and the rationale just named, qualitative research would give a richer description of the phenomenon.

When conducting this study, the qualitative research will be carried out using interviewing. The interview will be done using a literature based interview guide approach. A possible drawback is that sticking to the outlined topics will prevent other important topics from being raised by the participant. Additionally, within this study

there a number of areas being examined. More broadly, the first area is race and its impact on the relationship. Part of the purpose of my study was to explore racial identity theory, and to understand how Black women overcome society's negative evaluation of their group within the context of interracial dating (Helms 1994). The second area is the race of male partner and its impact on the sexual expression of their Black female partner. Within this study, *race* is being defined as human racial categories, which are based on visible traits (notably skin color, facial features), and self-identification. *Sexual expression* is being defined as the act of conveying ones sexuality through a broad range of behavior and processes, including the physiological, psychological, social, cultural, political, philosophical, ethical, moral, theological, legal and spiritual or religious aspects of sex and human sexual behavior.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This study examines the relationships between race, and the expression of sexuality through the lens of Black females. This study used voluntary sampling and recruited participants via email and flyers in the United States (see Appendix C). Due to the open-ended nature of the study, the investigator hoped to obtain information on external variables that may not be accounted for or anticipated in this study. The study was intended to offer valuable insight and understanding of the sexual expression of Black women and how their relationships with non-Caucasian men from different minority racial groups impact their sexual expression (See Appendix B, Letter of Approval).

This section includes a description of the research design that was used for this study, the sample population, data collection, research questions, and limitations of this study.

Research Design

This study utilized an exploratory research method that sought the participation of African American females who had been in both successful and failed interracial relationship with non-Caucasian men from different minority racial groups. This descriptive, qualitative research was conducive to trying to understand the phenomena of sexual expression that is often poorly understood. A purposive sampling method and snowball strategy was used to solicit participation.

Sample

The nature of data required a group of females who identify themselves as African American and in a relationship with other minority men from different racial groups. The participants were between the ages of 18-35, female, Black, and heterosexual. The participants were either in an interracial relationship currently or in the past with a non-Caucasian male. There was no geographic location requirement, because the interviews were conducted over the telephone. All participants spoke English in order to participate in this study.

Ethics and Safeguards

Before agreeing to participate in this research study, participants read an explanation of this study in the informed consent form. There were no risks or discomforts anticipated from their participation in the study. Potential risks or discomforts include possible emotional discomfort when asked questions during the interview. The anticipated benefit of participation was the opportunity to discuss feelings, perceptions, and concerns related to the experience of being in interracial relationship between minorities from different racial groups. The information gathered during this study will remain confidential in a locked drawer for three years after the completion of this study. Only the researcher will have access to the study data and information. There were no identifying names on the study tapes, and participant's names were not available to anyone. The tapes will be destroyed three years after the completion of the study. The results of the research will be published in the form of a graduate paper and may be published in a professional journal or presented at professional meetings. The information may help social workers, and others to better understand the psychological processes of

sexual expression amongst minority women in relationships with males from different minority groups. Referral sources are included in the informed consent form.

Data Collection Methods

This study used interviewing to capture the experiences and perspectives of the participants involved. The use of interviews as the data collection method begins with the assumption that the participants' perspectives are meaningful, knowledgeable, and able to be made explicit, and that their perspectives portray their experience of expressing their sexuality in heterosexual relationships with men from different racial minority groups. As for the purpose of this study, interviewing was selected because interpersonal contact is important as a means to gain opportunities for follow-up when desired, in the implementation of this study. The interviews were both semi-structured and in-depth. Participants received closed end questions, for demographic purposes, as well as opened ended questions, in order to obtain in-depth exploration of sexual expression among the participants. This allowed for the study to present the meaningfulness of the experience from the participant's perspective. The results of this study will inform other social workers about the experience of Black females in interracial relationship with men from different minority racial groups.

The participants were recruited using a snowball sampling approach through word-of-mouth and email techniques. This researcher used an email and flyer advertising the study and required criteria, posted in New York, Delaware, and Massachusetts (see Appendix C for flyer/email sample). The flyer was generated as an email and was sent to colleagues who met inclusion criteria. Participants were interested in this study either called or emailed the researcher in order to provide an address for the researcher to send

an informed consent form to the participant (See Appendix A for Informed Consent). Once the informed consent was obtained, the researcher called participants to set up a phone interview. Participants recruited by email/flyer were encouraged to refer the researcher to other potential participants. Additionally, the researcher had used the Smith College School for Social Work listserv for students of color to increase the likelihood of obtaining more diverse participants for the study. All interviews took place over the phone and interview times were collaboratively made by participant and researcher based on convenience and availability.

Data Analysis

Several methods of data analysis were used in this study including descriptive statistics (mean, median, mode, minimum and maximum age). The next method of analyzing the data was implemented by coding the collected data from the interviews. Analysis used a thematic approach to coding the data by looking at materials gathered from the interviews that were pertinent to answering the research question, i.e. relationships with men from different minority racial groups affects Black women's experiences of expressing their sexuality both psychologically and physically. This researcher identified themes by listening to common descriptive words used by participants, in each research question (see Appendix E). The next step was comparing the use of the theme across participants, i.e. positive or negative meaning. Finally, when the theme appeared reliable across participants, this researcher applied the theme to the information gathered in this study.

Limitations

When looking at the possible limitations of this study, participants may experience this study as more intrusive than quantitative approaches. This may be due to the personal nature of the study, where participants could say more than they intended to disclose and later could regret having done so. There also may be issues to personalities, moods, and interpersonal dynamics between the interviewer and the interviewee than methods like as surveys. Additionally, training interviewers and conducting interviews can be expensive and time-consuming, because qualitative interviewing requires considerable skill and experience. Analyzing and interpreting qualitative interviews is also more time-consuming than analyzing and interpreting quantitative interviews. Lastly, this study is more subjective than quantitative interviews because the researcher decided which quotes or specific examples are relevant to the study.

It is important to address this researchers own biases that may influence this study. This researcher chose to implement this study, in order to gain a greater understanding of interracial dating among people of color. As a Black women, this researcher wanted to further explore this phenomenon through the perspective and experience of other Black women. Primarily, due to her own experience of interracial dating as well as her desire to expand the literature on interracial dating to include perspectives of people of color.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

In this chapter, the findings were gathered through a series of interviews with 10 Black women who have been in an interracial relationship with a male from another minority group, excluding Caucasian and Black males. The structure for the interviews was designed to capture the participants' experience of their sexuality within these relationships, in which they were asked a series of questions regarding their sexual expression, their general experience being in an interracial relationship, their perceived impact of race and culture on their sexual expression, and their general definition of sexual expression for Black women (See Appendix D and Appendix E). It was explained that "sexual expression"/ "sexuality" could be defined as the degree of freedom they felt to express their sexual desires, i.e. the way they dressed with their partners, the degree of affection they expressed, or their physical sexual experiences. The interview questions were structured to be open-ended to gather information regarding their experiences of their sexual expression while in these interracial relationships; to create a discussion about sexuality among Black women and to gain insight to interracial relationships among people of color. Additionally, participants were asked to complete demographic questions regarding their age, whether they were currently in an interracial relationship, and the race of their past/present partner in their interracial relationship. Lastly, participants were asked to share whether their experience caused them to gain any insight about themselves, as Black women.

The information gathered from these interviews is presented as follows: demographic data of participants and their partner's racial background, experience of sexual expression within interracial relationship, experience of sexuality in the context of race, personal evaluation of sexual expression among Black women, and what these women have learned being in an interracial relationship.

Demographic Information

As discussed in Chapter III, Methods, this study involved 10 participants, all female. All participants identified as Black or African American. All participants had been in interracial relationships with men from various races as well as cultures including Indian (n=3), Japanese (n=1), Vietnamese (n=2), Cuban (n=2), and Puerto Rican (n=2). Average number of time spent with their most recent partner was 1 year and 43 days, 2 interracial relationships were on going, while 8 relationships had end. The age of these participants ranged from 18 years of age to 35 with a mean of 25 years old. Participants came from Massachusetts, Delaware, Mississippi, and California. Lastly, participant's backgrounds ranged from being students to working professionals.

Experience of Sexuality Within an Interracial Relationship

This section consists of participants' account of their sexual experience being in an interracial relationship with males from different minority groups. Their accounts of their sexuality were defined by their physical relationships with their previous/current partner, their freedom to express themselves outwards (clothing, hair) to a man from a different race, their ability to feel comfortable with their bodies, as well as their ability to express themselves to their partner in public places. The information will be presented in the following order: general experience of being in an interracial relationship, sexual

experience within relationship, and the relationship of sexual expression and partner's racial background to sexual expression.

Experience of Being in an Interracial Relationship

All participants were asked two descriptive questions about their general experience being in an interracial relationship. The first question was: can you describe your relationship with your current/past partner? And: can you describe how you felt being in an interracial relationship?

When looking at the first question, all participants had begun by describing the duration of their relationships ranging from 8 years to 1 month. The responses to this initial question were very colorful and the emotional content in their descriptions varied from participant to participant. On average, participants were with their partner for 1 year and 43 days. Two participants were currently in a relationship with a male from different racial minority group. One had been with her partner for 8 years, where she described her relationship by saying: "we are engaged and we live together...we have been together for eight years...he's my best friend." Another participant had been with her partner for 2 years, where she simply stated "it's awesome!" Both felt they would marry their current partners and discussed the impact of their racial and cultural differences, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

The other eight participants had been with their partners for 2 years to 1 month. Eight of the ten participants were in monogamous relationships with their partners, where one described her relationship plainly by saying:

We met our freshman year in college and started dating the spring of our freshman year till the spring of our sophomore year...he was my first

boyfriend...he had had other girlfriends before but we lost our virginity to each other...it was pretty serious...I mean I would say that I did love him.

Another participant reminisced about her relationship from her college years, where she said:

I met him and we instantly hit it off and started dating just like that. He was amazing....his mother was in jail in Rome for being apart of an embassy bombing...His family was very political...I can't remember where we met but we started dating each other and seeing each other for many months...it was very serious but his family was too traditional and too focused on marriage for me at the time.

However, three participants looked back on their relationships as entirely unhappy experiences. One participant expressed that: When I had started dating Mr. X, we couldn't walk anywhere with one another.

If we held hands in the mall...Black guys would always scream at me saying 'you like those spring rolls...why don't you get a real man'...I was always scared and nervous that people were staring at us...the relationship...I wouldn't do it again.

Another participant described her relationship in one word: "uncomfortable". When asked to describe further about her use of the word "uncomfortable", she was unable to do so and stated again "it was just uncomfortable, I felt like he was judging me all the time and I don't know why we stayed together as long as we did."

Turning to the general experience of interracial dating for the participants, the ten participants responses varied. However, an overarching theme for five of the participants was an emphasis on feeling "awkward" or inadequate showing affection to their partner as a major part of their experience dating interracially. One participant stated,

I always felt inexperienced [sexually] in this relationship...like I should be more than I am and it followed me into other relationships...it's funny but I never really thought about it till now...how his desire for me to be stereotypical like those Black women you see on music videos...had really hurt me...now I only date Black men...I just don't want to deal with that again.

Another participant described her experience as “awkward” when she stated that:

It was hard sometimes, because he was Vietnamese and I am Black- people would stare at us and I had a hard time with that...I never wanted others to look at me and judge me or think...why is he dating her? Or why am *I* dating him...I didn't think it would be a problem but it was...I couldn't even hold hands with him in public.

However, on the other end of the spectrum, one participant said “I feel more free with my partner, because he is open minded- like physically, mentally, just everything.” These accounts from these participants varied but each conveyed that their ability or inability to feel comfortable with their partner was an important part of how these individuals defined their experience in an interracial relationship as being “free” or being “awkward”.

Another theme that came about in the question (can you describe how you feel/felt being in an interracial relationship) was the impact of the family on the relationship. Six participants reported feeling “uncomfortable” with their partner's families as major influential factor in their experience. For example, one participant stated:

I remember his family being standoffish, but specifically his mother...she would try to overcompensate by being overly accepting which made me feel more uncomfortable- she just tried to hard to not acknowledge that we were racially different...my mother *was* accepting of everything...but my bother weren't so much...they didn't like it because of his lighter skin...I guess they thought he might as well be White.

Another participant stated:

I would go and see his family and I was [the] tallest one...can you imagine this tall Black women standing next to these short Asian men...that image would bother me because I wasn't sure if I could still feel like I was apart of my own community and accepted by his, which made me feel ambivalent about the whole relationship.

This participant continued to say her discomforts with looking into the future and having a family, where she said:

If we were to have children, I am light skinned and he is light. I want my children to be dark...I don't want my children to go through what I went through with skin color privilege as something that sets you apart [from the Black community]. I was looking forward to having brown children- maybe that's stupid but its how I feel.

Outside of the themes presented from this question (physical relationship with partner and family issues), two out of ten participants did not fall into either thematic category and reported that they felt "confident" and did not feel there were any differences dating another minority. However, they both stated that they would have experience the relationships differently with a Caucasian male. One participant stated:

I felt confident and I was in love...I think that because we were both minorities that we had similar experiences, which made our relationship positive...but if he had been a White man I would have felt less understood or even exoticized...which has happened to me.

The Relationship of Sexual Expression and Partner's Racial Background

Participants were asked five related-questions to gain insight into the relationship of sexual expression and the impact of their partners' race on the participant's sexual experiences within these interracial relationships. The first question was how do/did you see yourself sexually within your relationship? The response to this question varied where participants indicated that they felt "awkward" or "repressed" (n=6) to "inexperienced" (n=3) to "free" (n=1). One participant reported:

Hmmm...we had an active sexual relationship, he was Muslim...very traditional background so it wasn't very experimental but it *was* active...I never felt very comfortable with expressing what I wanted but I am still working on that now....so I guess nothing has changed since then but the sex it was often just...not that exciting." Another participant stated, "I think that I felt very awkward and

wasn't able to be myself...at in the beginning and towards the end I think I felt pretty much the same.

One participant summed up a common familiarity among those that reported feeling inexperienced, where she said, "I was very awkward...he was definitely more experienced than me...he made me feel like I should have had more...more knowledge and know what I was doing but I didn't at the time I was young." Another participant reported that although she did not have sex with her partner, she did feel free to express herself sexually in other ways. She stated:

I felt I could express myself just in the way I dressed, and he appreciated it when I accentuated parts of my body that a Black...like my hips and full women's body- each curve I could express sexually with him---despite me saving myself till marriage.

The participants were able to express their sexuality in multiple ways within these relationships, though the majority of the themes found in this question were negative experiences where the participants felt "awkward", "inexperienced" or repressed.

The second question was when you have been with men from the same race, have you experienced your sexuality differently? Looking at this question eight out of ten participants said they had experienced their sexuality differently with men from the same race. One participant reported, "Yes, in some ways, Black men can appreciate a different side of a woman, I can't describe it, it's the way they make you feel." Another participant said, "I just feel like I can be all of me...I can be comfortable and don't have to explain myself." Another participant said:

I don't know exactly how to describe it but I would say they have different expectations of me like his [her ex-boyfriend from a racially different minority group] expectations of me weren't as vigorous but with Black men definitely have more vigorous expectations.

Other things that participants said were “I don’t feel exoticized with Black men”, “I feel more respected sexually” and “I feel more controlled”.

For the participants that said they did not feel differently with their own race an overall theme was that they felt the same regardless of race. One participant said:

As a women I just feel like we don’t feel comfortable to express ourselves period...we often have to be with someone for a very long time before we even begin to say what we want sexually...I think this transcends race and it’s normal...though I wish that it wasn’t...I wish that we were allowed to be sexual like men and not just objects.

The other participant was not as expressive and simply said, “No, it’s the same.”

However, a common theme between both groups of those that did and did not feel a difference being with their own race was feeling unable to use their voice to communicate their sexual needs.

The third question was what do/did you consider your partners racial or cultural background to influence the expression of your sexuality? Seven out of the ten participants reported that their partner’s racial and/or cultural background had influenced the expression of their sexuality. One participant stated:

Greatly influenced...maybe it’s the culture piece but in his culture it’s not a past time it’s more to procreate- have babies...he has never seen his family kiss or show affection which I think has carried over into the relationship where sex means something different to him than me.

Another participant said:

I think I felt very judged by him sexually, where I never felt comfortable when we were having sex like I have with men from the same race but maybe that’s because that experience changed my view of dating outside my race...that’s sounds really horrible to say but I guess that was true for me.

Three participants out of the seven said their experience expressing their sexuality was different because they could express themselves more freely with their partner from

a different race. These participants reported that “I felt more freely and sultry”, “He just was more in attentive and in tune with my body than men I have been with from the same race.”

The three participants who reported that their partner’s racial and/or cultural background did not influence their sexual expression thematically emphasized the importance of communication, which transcended the impact of race on relationship for these individuals. One participant said:

I don’t think race had any influence at all...I think it was purely just my gender... being a women and not communicating sexually because I was scared or felt maybe he’ll reject me or I’ll hurt his feelings or something by asking for what I want.

Another participant said:

I think it all has to do with communication... you know... I’ve come to find that it has nothing to do with race for me...it’s just whether my partner really cares about getting to know me and asking questions about my cultural and me asking questions about his...if he does then our sexual relationship is better period.

The fourth question was what, if anything, would you (have) change(d) about your relationship in order to experience your sexuality more fully? Throughout most of the interviews with the participants (n=8), an undeniable theme was a desire for more communication within their relationships. One participant said:

I wish we had talked more about sex or our sexuality to make it more comfortable for me...definitely more of a dialogue between us would have helped...it may have changed how awkward I felt sexually with him and how racially I felt he had expectations of me that weren’t fair.

Another participant said “If we talked about it then I would like him to be more open minded and to experiment a little bit more or bring what I bring to the table more freely in that aspect [sexually]”. Other things participants said were “We need to talk more”, “we need to learn about each others differences so we can compromise”, and “ I think

communication is the key.” Two of the participants answering this question said that they would not change a thing about their relationship, where one stated, “Nothing, I can’t think of a thing because we really talk to one another and let me tell you- he can take criticism.”

Lastly, participants were asked what made them stay or leave from your interracial relationship. This question was trying to examine whether the race of their partner influenced the success or failure of the relationship. Two of the respondents were currently in a relationship with a male from different minority group, and reported that the main reason they have stayed is because “he is my best friend” and “I love him.” Those (n=8) that were not currently in these relationships had varied responses. Two participants said they left due to location. One participant stated, “I left because we argue a lot...but mainly due to having a long distance relationship”. Three participants attributed their separation to having a different perspective on the expectations of the relationship, where one participant said, “it was because we had different beliefs, where he was looking for someone to marry and I felt it was too soon and I was too young.” Three other participants contributed their break-up to cultural differences with their families. One participant summed up this experience well, where she said:

His family was very traditional, and were not supportive of his dating someone outside his race and outside his religious background...I had two strikes against me and it was really important for me to have a strong relationship with my partners family...just wasn’t possible at least not at the time.

Experience of Sexuality in the Context of Race

This section is composed of participants’ experience and interpretation of their sexuality as Black women. Their sexual experience as Black women was defined by their

perception of how Black women are perceived to be in romantic relationships within the Black community or stereotypically how they feel they should be. The narrative of their sexual experiences, perception of their sexuality in the context of race, and insight they gained about their sexuality as Black women in interracial relationships will be explored in this section. The information will be presented in the following order: the perception of how Black women generally express their sexuality in romantic relationships, how they perceive themselves racially in romantic relationships in contrast to how they feel Black women are perceived, and what they have learned about themselves as Black women from being in an interracial relationship.

Perception of Black Women's Sexual Expression

In order to explore the general perception of Black women in romantic relationships, the first question participants were asked was: As a Black woman, how do you describe sexual expression among Black women in romantic relationships? The responses to this question varied but overall the themes that arose were either a positive perception of how Black women sexually express themselves or a negative view of how others, typically not Black, perceived them.

When looking at the six out of ten participants that had a positive perception of Black women in relationships, a common theme was strength and direction. One participant said, "I would say that we are very head strong. We [Black women] know what we want and we expect a lot out of our partners sexually and mentally." Another participant said, "I feel as a Black woman we feel at home with our bodies, we ask for what we want and we can give pleasure without a feeling of degradation...we do what feels good, what feels natural, what feels comfortable." Another participant said:

We express our sexuality in the way we dress, clothing that hugs our bodies like we have pride in our curves our hips ours butts our full figures and our hair...we respect our bodies...you know my body is my temple it's true and we want our partner to respect our bodies too.

Participants said things like “we tend to accentuate parts of our body-big hips, big butts, and highlight it in the way we dress...that's our sexuality” and “There are times we feel very free and times we feel almost frigid;” The responses to this questions was very broad, and the women involved in this study had a plethora of perceptions and beliefs about sexuality among Black women.

When looking at the negative perception, four out of the ten participants felt the perception of Black women sexually was negative. One participant stated:

I never really thought about how others perceived me sexually until ex-boyfriend's [from her interracial relationship] cousin came back from the *Vagina Monologues* and said ‘it was so great, the African American orgasm was so funny’. When he described it, he said it was loud, explicit, lots of swearing, and sexually just dirty....that has stuck with me because it was very derogatory to hear my boyfriend's cousin say that...loud, hypersexual, and aggressive that is how they view us...and I started to realize the reason I felt so awkward sexually with my boyfriend was because he expected me to be this stereotypical Black female.

Another participant stated:

I have been involved in lots of interracial relationships where I have felt like men wanted to exoticize me to be loud, uninhibited, or just aggressive---like it was an expectation because I am Black that I should be this Black women that has no sexual inhibitions but that's just not true I am a women like any other regardless of race...I'm not a slut and I resent men from other races implying that I should be one in bed...that is what in general I think our [Black] sexuality or expression is perceived and portrayed in the world...and I think the media plays heavy hand in this and it make me sad.

The accounts from these two participants give full representation of the four participants who felt the general perception for Black women in romantic relationships was “harmful” or “degrading”.

Personal Evaluation of Sexual Expression among Black Women

When exploring how these participants felt individually about their sexual expression in relation to how they felt a Black woman does express her sexuality, there were two questions aimed to obtain insight about this experience. The first question was: Do you think you express your sexuality in the way, in which you described previously, as a Black woman? Five out of ten participants said that they did express themselves as they had described. One participant said:

Yes, with age I have become more comfortable with my body where I will accentuate my hip and my butt and I love my curves- like I said before I feel respecting my body as a Black women is my sexual expression.

Another participant said, “I think that I am strong and I have direction. This carries over into my relationship in more ways than just sexually.” In addition, another participant said “Yes I think do. I think that my own feelings about it; is that it vacillates with who I’m with or how I feel about my body and the person I’m with at the time.” All five participants were from the 6 participants that had a positive view of sexual expression among Black women in romantic relationships, as a general perception.

Five out of the ten participants said they did not express themselves sexually like the Black women they had described as a general perception. Two of these participants felt they were “less assertive” than they had described where they were unable to communicate to their partner what they “wanted”. One participant reported, “I envision Black women to be so assertive and being more direct, but sexually within my own relationship I’m unable to do so.” The other three participants described their personal sexual expression as more “conservative”, less “degrading”, and more “comfortable” with their bodies. One participant reported that:

At my age I have become more comfortable talking about sex, having sex, but at the same time I will always be more timid and less vocal than how the *Vagina Monologues* had depicted me as a Black women—it's just not realistic to categorize us all that way.

Moreover, another participant reported:

Although, I am can be assertive in my job and having goals, sexually I feel more repressed, because my partner, due to his background, sees sex different so he isn't as free as I am so I find myself keeping my needs to myself.

These five participants were also asked how they felt about not being able to express themselves as they described. One participant said:

It makes me feel sad and frustrated because I feel as if I am backed into a corner, there is a part of me I am unable to express where you always are questioning how that person is perceiving you, where I don't want to be too assertive or aggressive because I don't want to feel rejected.

Another participant said “I feel as if I should talk more, because I don't want to feel uncomfortable or judged.” Overall, these women expressed a common theme of wanting to be better communicators with their partners, where sexually they did not want their partner to reject them.

What Have You Learned About Yourself

Part of the intention of this study was to explore how dating interracial affected Black women's sexual expression as well as to explore whether the phenomena of sexual differences are real. When searching for this insight, this researcher felt it was important to understand whether individuals engaging in interracial dating gained any understanding about themselves in the process. The following question was asked as means to gain this information: What have you learned about yourself as a Black women in an interracial relationship?

When looking at the body of responses from the participant, seven out of the ten participants talked about issues that can arise in an interracial relationship. One participant said:

I learned that I can be the calm influence and not a hot temper. I feel the Black community is very open. If you deal with oppression- we like you. You are apart of our community but in other minority racial groups they require more effort with color politics [skin privilege] , anti-black politics...I have had to develop a thicker skin and I have had to work on my self-image as to not be compared or to compare myself to women within any other race but my own.

Moreover, another participant said:

I learned that I'm not willing to compromise on certain aspects and I guess that as a black women I feel like we don't get fully appreciated and we don't understand our full potential at times, but being in an interracial relationship and teaching him about our [Black] culture makes me feel like I'm really special and more confident as a Black women.

These two responses specifically summarize the response of all seven participants. Other things that were mentioned were "communication", learning to "ask for what I want" and feeling "family was important" in an interracial relationship.

Three out of the ten of the participants learned that they did not want to be in an interracial relationship. One respondent said:

I definitely learned that I need similarities to make a relationship survive and because we were interracial there were things or differences that were highlighted for me because it was so complex with cultural differences and racial differences that can make things difficult on a relationship.

Another participant said:

I learned what I need and what I want. Our cultural differences would have created a huge wedge in our relationship...mostly because of family differences...I would rather or I guess I would definitely prefer to Black men now.

The third participant merely said, "I learned that I prefer to be with Black men."

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate sexual expression among Black women in interracial relationships with men from different minority groups. The experience of these women was explored through the narratives of women who had been in or currently are in interracial relationships with a male who is not Black or Caucasian. This chapter will explore the findings in the following order: 1) summary of key findings, 2) relationship of findings to literature, 3) implications, 4) limitations of study, and 5) conclusion.

Summary of Key Findings

The information presented in chapter IV described the respondent's experiences of their sexual expression within the context of an interracial relationship. There were differences in participants age (19-35); partners racial background (Japanese, Vietnamese, Indian, Porto Rican, and Cuban); length of relationship (1 month to 8 years); etc. Despite these differences, the participants were able to report on their sexual expression and the impact of being in an interracial relationship on their sexuality and/or sexual expression. When looking at the range of responses to the questions in this study, the Black women involved varied in how they experienced their sexual expression, interracial dating, and their view of sexuality in the context of race.

Some of the participants in this study reported feeling "awkward" within their interracial relationships (n=6), inexperienced sexually in an interracial relationship

(n=3), or feeling “free” in an interracial relationship (n=1). In comparison to being with someone of the same race (n=10), these women felt sexually different within their mix-race relationships (n=8), where they described the experience as feeling less “exoticized” or sexually understood by their partner. Two participants reported feeling no difference dating outside their race, and reported that their gender was the primary influential factor in dating, because they felt women, in general, are more sexually repressed than males. Sexually participants (n=7) felt that the race or cultural background of their partner had influenced their sexual expression, using words like “greatly”, or “judged”, or “uncomfortable”. Of the three participants that felt race was not a factor, one participant said that communication transcends race, where communication and gender was most influential. Additionally, participants overall (n=8) felt they would change the level of communication in their relationships, where they would “talk more”.

Looking specifically at sexuality in the context of race, the majority (n=8) of the participants had a positive view of sexual expression among Black women in relationships. Participants reported that generally Black sexual expression was characterized by “strength”, “direction”, and the pride of dressing their bodies by accentuating hips, butts, thighs etc. Four participants reported having a negative perception of Black sexual expression. Their perception can be understood within the context of the media, and hip hop culture, where these women felt they were being depicted as “loud”, aggressive”, “exotic”, and “uninhibited”. These participants found images in the media to be “degrading” and/or “harmful”. These strong images of Black female sexuality, may or may not have affected their relationships. Furthermore, half of the participants (n=5) felt that they, who had a positive perception of Black sexual

expression, felt that they did express their sexuality as women who are “strong” and “have direction”. The other participants (n=5) reported that they did not describe their relationship as they had described, where they felt as if they were “less assertive” and did not communicate their needs to their partners. Four of these participants felt they were “conservative” and not “degraded” as objects in their relationships.

Finally, participants were asked what they had learned being in an interracial relationship. The majority of these participants (n=7) would continue to date interracially, but they did bring up a number of issues that were poignant to their experiences in interracial relationships. The first was the importance of communication within these relationships, where participants discussed having an open dialogue with their partner about their sexual, occupational, familial, and racial experiences. Participants also discussed taking ownership of their racial backgrounds and identifying themselves as the “expert” of her experience. Participants also discussed the importance of getting along with their partners family, and the difficulties that can arise when a relationship with a partners family does not occur. In addition to participants that would interracially date again, three participants (n=3) reported that they would not interracially date again. The main reasons were issues concerning a difficult relationship with their partners family, due to race or culture. One participant described this difficulty as a “cultural wedge”.

Relationship of Findings to Literature

The research from this study showed that attitudes about interracial dating are complex and varied among my participants. Looking at Kalbfleish and Harris (2002) research, they used the structural theory and the racial motivation theory to gain an understanding of interracial dating. More specifically, racial motivation theory

hypothesizes that interracial marriages occur because of racial difference, whereby at least one partner sees the racially different other more appealing because of his or her race (Harris and Kalbfleish 2002). Their quantitative study found one partner would exoticize the other race because their external beauty and skin color were the primary characteristics contributing to their selection of that mate. The results of my study on sexual expression among Black women in interracial relationships found similar results, where women reported feeling that their partner had exoticized them. These women reported to be the objects of their partner, where their external beauty and skin color contributed to their partners expectation of their sexual expression. In summary, these women reported feeling “awkward” and “uncomfortable” with their partner.

Vaquera and Kao (2005), they investigated interracial dating using stigma management theories. This theoretical approach explored the context of outside influences that can affect the dynamic between couples, where individuals involved in interracial relationships may use methods to avoid stigmatization when in public (Vaquera and Kao 2005). The research found in my study confirmed that the use of stigma management was prevalent among my participants. Some participants reported taking measures to avoid letting others know about their partnerships, where participants would not hold hands in public, or avoid their partners families.

In Dilworth and Rouse-Arnett’s (2006) qualitative study, they looked at African American women’s sexual values and attitudes. Dilworth and Rouse-Arnett (2006) found that their sexual attitude and values were shaped by their experiences with parental, peer, and cultural influences like the media. The media is a very influential factor in African American sexual development. Multiple researchers have expressed that the media

promotes an unattainable standard of beauty (Dilworth & Rouse-Arnett, 2006, 2006; Mitchem, 2004; Mitchell, 1999; Weekes, 2002). Dilworth and Rouse-Arnett (2006) found that music videos portray Black females as provocative dresser and create negative stereotypical messages, endorsing promiscuity or hastened sexual activity. A number of participants from my study expressed feeling pressure from the media to portray a sexual image of being “loud”, “aggressive”, “cursing” and uninhibited. The participants in my study provided narratives of the media that has negatively affected them- like rap videos. Participants reported that the media portrays them in a negative light, where their partner exoticized them within the context of these portrayals.

As a result, multiple researchers found that Black women’s sexual expression is impacted by a negative social view of themselves (Mitchem, 2004; Mitchell, 1999; Weekes, 2002). According to Mitchem (2004), appearance is very important to Black women as a means of defraying a negative social views, where getting hair and nails professionally done has become apart of a dress code for young Black women. In particular, Black women within my study reported expressing themselves sexually through clothing. They reported wearing clothes that complimented their bodies. Some of these women also reported how negative the media is on their sexual expression, using words like “harmful” and “degrading”.

Additionally, Stephens and Philips’ (2003) study explored the development of a sexual self that was defined by the understanding of the messages and meanings an individual is given about sexual roles and behaviors in a racial and sexual context. Notably, this study wanted to look at African American sexuality and focused on sexual scripting processes, where they found eight sexual scripts, described in the literature

review as the Diva, the Gold Digger, the Freak, the Dyke, the Gangsta Bitch, the Sister Savior, the Earth Mother, and the Baby Mama. The primary purpose of this study was to explore the ways gender and racial stereotypes are integrated into African American sexuality within the context of hip-hop culture. Looking at the range of responses from Black women within my study, the sexual script that was most described was the Freak. The Freak is described as “wild and kinky”. Participants used words like “uninhibited”, “loud”, and “over sexualized”. Participants continually reported being exoticized as a the Freak, where personally they expressed themselves much differently. Participants used words like “reserved”, “conservative”, “inexperienced”, and “uncomfortable”, which is a notable contrast to the scripts portrayed by the media.

An important concept in racial identity is understanding the development by which Black women overcome internalized racial stereotypes and negative self. (Kohatsu et al 2000; Miller and Garran 2007). The questions aimed at understanding this development focused on participant’s definition of Black sexual expression, their perception of their own sexual expression, and their experience dating interracially, as well as what they have learned from interracially dating. My study found that the majority of women, despite these images, had a positive view of sexual expression among Black women- they used words like “strong” and “assertive”. Participants were also asked to describe why they left or stayed in their relationships. Overall regardless of how they felt others portrayed them, they stayed in their interracial relationship, because they were in “love.”

Moreover, this qualitative study also explored social identity theory and multicultural theory. Social identity theory says that the more strongly individuals

identify with their group, the less favorable attitudes they hold toward dissimilar groups (Taifel & Turner, 1986). In contrast, multicultural theory says that affirmation towards ones group, particularly with ethnicity, should correspond with high levels of acceptance towards dissimilar group (Phinney, 1996). In Negy, Shreve, Jensen, and Uddin's (2003) study, they found that individuals with higher levels of in-group bias are more negative toward members of other ethnic groups, which would support social identity theory. However, the results of my study may provide a starting point to explore these theories in the context of interracial dating. That is to say individuals who have a strong affirmation for their own group would have a high level of acceptance for someone that is racially different. And looking at interracial dating may also provide evidence that individuals that are unable to date outside their race may fit the social identity model. Within this current study, only two participants said they would not interracial date and would "prefer" to date only Black men in the future.

Implications

This study used voluntary sampling and used qualitative research methods. Participants in this study were female and identified as Black. Although only a small sample was obtained, the narratives and experiences of these women's sexual expression within interracial relationship may be valuable for social workers to understand the experience of interracial dating cross culturally. There are a growing number of individuals today involved in interracial relationships, where information gained from this study may be informative to social workers in acknowledging the complexity of sexuality and its association to race.

Participants reported that communication was the most important component in dating outside one's race. Their personal experiences demonstrated that openness to their partner about race and their needs (sexually and personally) were critical in having a lasting relationship with their partner. As social workers, it is important for clinicians, working with couples and families to have some familiarity with issues that commonly arise in interracial couples. That is to say, that clinicians should familiarize themselves with racial identity models, familiarize themselves with sexual scripts within different cultures, and recognize the hardships couples may face due to their racial identities. By doing so, clinicians will be informed to help interracial couples deal with the problems they may experience in the world. Clinicians should also recognize that the meaning of race and sex differs in culture. Since interracial dating is usually discussed from the perspective of the dominant culture, Caucasian, it is important for a clinician to shift their lens to understand the complexity of interracial dating among people of color.

Furthermore, further research should be done in the area of understanding interracial dating among people of color. Unlike this study, research should focus separately on issues of sexual expression, sexual expectations across races, and sexual expression in homosexual interracial relationships. Additionally, further research should be done from the perspective of people of color in order to gain a better understanding of the impact on minorities in interracial relationships, as well as their experiences being apart from the dominant culture. Social workers working with couples in interracial relationships could benefit from gaining more insight outside of the dominant perspective. Lastly, further research should be done on the impact of interracial dating on families. In this study, the second most reported issue in interracial dating was the relationship of

individuals with their partners family. This seems to be a topic of interest, because families can play a significant role in relationships.

Limitations

When looking at the results of this current study, there are several limitations to consider. First, there is limited research on interracial dating from the perspective of people of color. A majority of the research available is from the perspective of White males in relationship with Black females. For example, most research sampled White males. Historically, White males are from the dominate culture, where they have had a much different position and experience than minorities. Furthermore, little research has been done, from the perspective of females, on interracial relationships and/or on sexual expression in academia. Sexual expression has usually been explored within the context of sexually transmitted diseases, reproduction, and heterosexual coupling. This study in particular extracted information from only a few primary authors, which was very limiting in exploring the depths of this phenomena, because there is not enough research to compare these finding to.

In addition to the lack of resources, these findings cannot be generalizable. The sample size was very small with only 10 participants, where participants were recruited voluntarily using snowball sampling. Although the hope was that more participants would take part in this study, there was not enough time allotted to achieve this goal. Most of the participants were roughly 24 years old, which may have also influenced the perspective, experience, and finding of this study. One can question that age differences may influence social acceptance of interracial dating. Furthermore, it may also be important to note that there may be differences between those who responded to take part

in this interview and those that did not. Respondents may have had a stronger opinion than non-respondents may have had. Given the limitations of such a small sample, this study is an important exploratory study, where other researcher may wish to further explore my questions in a larger and more systematic sample on such phenomena.

The reliability and validity of this study must also be explored. Due to the nature of this study, it is important to recognize researcher bias. More specifically, because I am a female and a person of color my own beliefs and experiences may create a bias in this study. Another factor that may affect reliability and validity was the small sample size used in this study, where not enough participants were used to compensate for response bias of participants, i.e. participants with strong opinions. Furthermore, no males were asked to participate in this study, which may also create a bias on the experience of being in an interracial relationship and sexual expression. Additionally, the interviews were very personal and may have been intrusive for some participants, which may have caused participants to hold back or feel uncomfortable talking about their sexuality and expression.

Conclusion

In conclusion, looking at the original exploratory questions for this qualitative study, research on interracial dating and sexual expression among Black women can serve as a barometer of race relations within interracial dating (Yancey 1998; Kohatsu et al 2000; Scott 1987). The Black women involved in this study have had to evaluate their racial identity, their partners' racial identity, and its impact on their relationship. This study actively explored how racial identities can influence women's sexual development in heterosexual relationships. Through the perspective of Black women who are/have

been in interracial relationships, the negotiation of the benefits and drawbacks of an interracial relationship was also explored in this study. Finally, this study explored the perspective of Black women in interracial relationships and its influence or affect on sexuality. The objectives of this study were achieved, and the narratives from participants were very enlightening, colorful, and important for the practice of clinical social work.

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Appendix A

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Dear Participant,

Before agreeing to participate in this research study, it is important that you read the following explanation of this study. This statement describes the purpose, procedures, benefits, risks, discomforts, and precautions of the program. Also described are your rights to withdraw from the study at any time. No guarantees or assurances can be made as to the results of the study.

This research study is designed to examine the experience of minority women in relationships with males from different racial minority groups. My name is Sara Burton, and I am a graduate student at the Smith College for Social Work in Northampton, Massachusetts. I am conducting this study to learn more about how minority women experience their sexuality in relationships with males from different minority racial groups. Participation in the study involves one 45-minute interview. The interview will be audio taped by me and later transcribed for the purpose of data analysis. All interviews will be conducted on the telephone at a time that is mutually agreeable to you, the participant, and me, the researcher.

The nature of data required is a populace of females who identify themselves as African American and in a relationship with other minority men from different racial groups. As a participant, you must be between the ages of 18-35, female, Black, and heterosexual. You also must have been in an interracial relationship currently or in the past with a male who is/was not Caucasian or Black. You must speak English in

order to take part in this study. There is no geographic location requirement, because the interview will be conducted over the telephone. The interview will be approximately 45 minutes and audio taped.

Potential risks or discomforts include possible emotional discomfort when asked questions about sex during the interview. If you do experience any discomfort, then a referral list can be made through the national association of social work (NASW, www.socialworkers.org). If you would like to have further dialogue with other people in interracial relationships, then you can find discussion groups through www.yahoo.com by clicking on Groups. Then type in “interracial dating” and join the group of your choosing. The anticipated benefit of participation is the opportunity to discuss feelings, perceptions, and concerns related to the experience of being in interracial relationships as a Black woman.

The information gathered during this study will remain confidential in a locked drawer during this project. Only this researcher and Smith College Institutional Review Board will have access to the study data and information. There will not be any identifying names on the tapes, and participant’s names will not be available to anyone. The tapes will be destroyed three years after the completion of the study. The results of the research will be used for a Masters Thesis and may be published in a professional journal or presented at professional meetings. If the data is used in a publication or presentation then the researcher will use brief illustrative quotes as to disguise the participants identity and in order to maintain confidentiality. Participation in this study is voluntary; refusal to participate will involve no penalty. Each participant is free to withdraw consent and discontinue participation in this project at any time before June 1,

2008. If you should withdraw, then all materials relating to you will be destroyed. Also you may choose not to answer any questions at any time during the interview. There will be no cost for participation in the research and you will not be paid to take part in this research project.

If there are any questions concerning this research project participants can contact the researcher for this study at (removed). Questions regarding rights as a person in this research project should be directed to Ann Hartman, Smith College Review Board Chairman at 413-585-7974.

YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Signature of participant and Date

Participants name (printed)

Signature of Researcher

Appendix B

HUMAN SUBJECTS REVIEW COMMITTEE APPROVAL LETTER

May 8, 2008

Sara Burton

Dear Sara,

Your second set of revisions has been reviewed and all is now in order. We are happy to give final approval to your study.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain signed consent documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your project.

Sincerely,

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Jennifer Perloff, Research Advisor

Appendix C

LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS

Hello,

My name is Sara Burton and I am a graduate student at Smith College School for Social Work. I am conducting a study on how African American women experience their sexuality in romantic relationships with men from racially different minority groups and I am currently looking for African American women to interview. The interview will take no more than 45 minutes.

In order to participate in this study the following criteria must be met:

- To participate you must be between the ages of 18-35, female, African American, and heterosexual.
- To participate you must have been in an interracial relationship currently or in the past with a male who is/was from a different racial minority group, excluding Caucasian.
- All participants must speak English in order to participate in this study.
- There is no geographic location requirement, because the interviews will be conducted over the telephone.

I will be asking participants about their sexual expression being in an interracial relationship, as well as the thoughts and the feelings that were invoked about your racial identity within these relationships. Additionally, I will ask that the participant provide demographic information about their self for this study.

With the participants consent I will be audio taping the interview and then transcribing it myself. Their name and identifying information will be held in confidence. I will label all interview notes and audio tapes with numbers instead of real names.

On request, I will be happy to send you a finalized copy of the summary of my findings. In addition, if you could suggest other eligible colleagues that I could interview I would appreciate it. If you are interested in participating in this study, then please contact me at (removed).

Thank you for your time and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Sara Burton

Appendix D

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Initial Phone Contact

Hello,

My name is Sara Burton. I am a Smith Social Work student. I am conducting a study on how African American women experience their sexuality in romantic relationships with men from racially different minority groups and I am currently looking for African American women to interview.

In order to participate in this study the following criteria must be met:

- To participate you must be between the ages of 18-35, female, African American, and heterosexual.
- To participate you must have been in an interracial relationship currently or in the past with a male who is/was from a different racial minority group, excluding Caucasian.
- All participants must speak English in order to participate in this study.
- There is no geographic location requirement, because the interviews will be conducted over the telephone.

May I have your permission to talk to you about this new study?

- If no, say Thank you for your time and end the call.
- If yes, continue as below

I will be asking participants about their sexual expression being in an interracial relationship, as well as the thoughts and the feelings that were invoked about your racial identity within these relationships. Additionally, I will ask that the participant provide demographic information about their self for this study. The interview will take no more than 45 minutes.

With the participants consent I will be audio taping the interview and then transcribing it myself. Their name and identifying information will be held in confidence. I will label all interview notes and audio tapes with numbers instead of real names.

Do you think you would be interested?

- If no, say Thank you for your time and end the call.
- If yes, I will ask for their address to send the informed consent form, and explain that one signed copy must be sent to the researcher. Once informed consent is received I will call the participant to set up date and time of interview.

On request, I will be happy to send you a finalized copy of the summary of my findings. In addition, if you could suggest other eligible colleagues that I could interview I would appreciate it. If you have any further questions, please contact me at (removed).

Thank you for your time and I look forward to speaking with you at said time and date.

Appendix E

INTERVIEW

Hello,

This is Sara Burton from Smith School for Social Work. I am calling to conduct the interview we had set up at said time and date. You have been read the informed consent and agreed to participate.

- Do you have any question before we proceed?
- If yes, I will answer question.
- If no, we will proceed with interview.
- The following question will provide demographic materials:
- How old are you?
- Are you in or have you been in an interracial relationship with a male from a different minority group?
- What is/was your partner's racial background?

The following eight open-ended questions will guide this study:

1. Can you describe your relationship with your current/past partner?
2. How do/did you see yourself sexually within your relationship?
3. When you have been with men from the same race, have you experienced your sexuality differently?
4. To what extent do/did you consider your partner's racial or cultural background to influence the expression of your sexuality?
5. Can you describe how you feel/felt being in an interracial relationship?

6. As a Black woman, how would you describe sexual expression among Black women in romantic relationships?
7. Do you think you express your sexuality in the way in which you described previously as a Black woman?
8. If you are/were not able to express yourself sexually, as you described, how does that make you feel?
9. What, if anything, would you (have) change(d) about your relationship in order to experience your sexuality more fully?
10. What has made you stay or leave from you interracial relationship?
11. What have you learned about yourself as Black woman in an interracial relationship?

Thank you for your time. I will be happy to send you a finalized copy of the summary of my findings, upon your request. If you could suggest other eligible colleagues that I could interview I would appreciate it. If you have any further questions, please contact me at (removed).