THE HIP HOP GENERATION
African American Male-Female Relationships in a Nightclub Setting

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In examining Black male-female relationships, Bell, Bouie, and Baldwin (1990) noted that most of the research is pathology-centered. This research focuses on a worldview or cultural orientation whose center is Euro-American. It is assumed that Black heterosexual relationships are based on the same values, lifestyles, and beliefs as those of Euro-American heterosexual relationships. To support this belief, the research emphasizes Black-White comparisons that are not cross-culturally sensitive to variation (Allen, 1978). Any deviation from the Euro-American pattern is considered abnormal.

Asante (1980) proposed that African American cultural orientation is distinct from that of Euro-Americans. African American cultural orientation and worldview are situated in the cultural, historical, and philosophical tradition of African people. This worldview is defined by two principles: "oneness with nature" and "survival of the group." In this holistic perspective, each partner provides for the other’s intellectual, emotional, physical, and social stimulation. Neither partner exploits the relationship (Bell et al., 1990).

Other social scientists, such as Page (1997), Hutchinson (1997), and Michaels (1995), discussed the heterogeneity and variation within African American communities. For example, Michaels used a historical examination of writers such as Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Zora Neal Hurston, and W.E.B. DuBois to discuss variation among African Americans. Page also suggested that promoters
of the traveling photographic exhibit *Songs of My People* showed only the positive attributes of African American life from a Euro-centric perspective. She believed the exhibit did not present the heterogeneous nature of African American communities. Hutchinson provided an examination of negative portrayals of African Americans and their varied responses to these portrayals. In doing so, she described African Americans as socially and economically varied and continually changing within and among their communities.

This study should be interpreted within the context of a socially heterogeneous population of young adult African American women in a low-income urban environment. The aim of the ethnography was to identify perceptions of female-male relationships from the viewpoint of African American women and to provide a context for understanding these perceptions by examination of theory.

**METHODS**

The ethnography took place at a local gangsta rap nightclub (Club X, fictitious name) in Houston, Texas, from May 1993 to the summer of 1995. This nightclub is not unique among Blacks or the general population of Houston. It is similar to other Black clubs in terms of age and gender composition and percentage of non-Whites (small numbers of Whites and Hispanics). Only a few clubs in Houston play gangsta rap music. It is the controversial type mentioned in the local news. These rappers espouse themes of killing, use of guns, extremely derogatory statements about women, and explicit sexual statements. The music also portrays realistic views of life in the African American community and what it is like to be Black in a White-dominated American society. This music appeals to diverse groups of younger African Americans. Club X was chosen because it has the previously discussed characteristics and because many young African Americans frequent this club. A former student who frequented the club introduced me to the club. She was infected with HIV by one of the "regulars" at the club. Through
discussions with her, I learned about sexual transactions in her network and that this club was a focal point for their interactions.

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATIONS

Ethnographers describe cultures or certain aspects of a culture and attempt to understand the culture from the perspective of the people living within it. The ethnography involved participant observation on Thursday, Friday, and Monday nights. Observations focused on female-male interactions and the general atmosphere of the club. Public interactions between men and women were observed. Participant observation at the nightclub was concerned with issues such as: What do they do at the club? How do men approach women and how do women respond? I observed interactions, listened to peoples' conversations, and talked to women about men (this usually took place in the restroom).

INTENSIVE INTERVIEWS

Five African American women between the ages of 25 and 32 years old were intensively interviewed. Interviews lasted between 1 and 4 hours and were conducted at their homes, my biocultural laboratory at the University of Houston, at a park, and at a McDonald's restaurant. Intensive interviews dealt with determining who to date, categorization of men, sexism, dancing, personal appearance, economics, female-male relationships, use of the word "bitch," rap music, and condom use and nonuse. The interviewed women were very diverse in terms of their backgrounds. Two respondents were students with no children (Latasha, 22 years old, and Yvonne, 25 years old), LaQuita (28 years old) was unemployed and on welfare with three children, Shontele was a 25-year-old woman with one child who lives with her parents, and the eldest was Anna, a 32-year-old professional working woman with no children (all names are fictitious).
RESULTS

CATEGORIZATION OF MEN AND WOMEN

Categorization of men by women was based on a number of criteria. For instance, a student informant stated that different areas of the club are allocated to certain drug dealers, and men form a hierarchy. Drug dealers are at the top and are ranked by the amount of money they spend at the club. Rappers who have recorded an album are next in the ranking, and men who work for the drug dealers are beneath the rappers in rank, followed finally by the regulars—men who do not fall into the other categories (they have a regular job)—who are at the bottom of the hierarchy. Certain women are associated with different groupings of men and also form a hierarchy based on the men’s rank. There is a desire among some women to date men in the upper echelon of the club. This means dating the top drug dealers and their friends or rappers.

Shontele said:

You’re in it but you’re looking out. Yeah, I know I’m hanging out with these people. That’s not me. I’m in the front of all of them. I’m not in the back of them or in the middle. So I have a better chance of getting out. Some women still get respect because of boyfriends they used to have.

Unfortunately, “to get in front of them,” you have to date the high-level drug dealers. This is an attempt at social elevation and an economic categorization that symbolizes the attempt at upward mobility.

Another way women categorize men is through their personal appearance. This includes physical attractiveness and clothing. Clothes add to a man’s physical attractiveness and also provide a clue about economic status (although women reported that this sometimes can be misleading). Finally, women group men based on their potential as a husband or sexual partner. A potential short-term sexual partner is one who is a good dancer, spends money, and may have money (as shown by a Lexus or Tommy Hilfiger clothes).
Potential husbands are men with an education, those who spend money and appear to have money, and who do not appear to have a lot of women. As a mate, women want someone they can talk to (compatible with) and someone they feel will “treat me right.”

Manning (1973) stated that these symbols represent sensory and ideological poles of meaning. The sensory pole contains clusters of meaning related to the physiological, for instance, physical attractiveness and dancing. At the other end of the spectrum is the ideological (education, employment status, and perceived sex experience). Whereas education and employment status attest to a man’s positive motivation and show maturity and responsibility, perceived sex experience is not viewed as a negative attribute for men. Men can have a number of sexual liaisons as long as they are not perceived as a “player,” someone with a number of sexual partners at the same time.

Concerning reputations, Yvonne said “I don’t like one-night stands. But plenty of it goes on.” Women who frequent the club weekly may get a bad reputation.

Some men they’ll say like I slept with her. My homeboy slept with her. They do get reputations being in there all the time. Some women don’t care about their reputation. They’re having a good time and trying to see what they can get out of someone. Or saying, “Hey I met this guy in a Suburban and I met a guy in a Lexus and he took me to breakfast and we went to the hotel” and things like that. Some people like that. It’s a status thing. It raises their status. Then you have some people with real low self-esteem. So when they go out and have guys approaching them, and say “Well, I’ll do this and that for you and I have this and that,” it makes them feel I am something. I am somebody. At one time I had low self-esteem. Now I’m at the point where I can dress the way that I want to dress and it doesn’t bother me if anyone talks to me or if not. Women feel that if no one talks to them then maybe I’m not cute enough maybe this or that is not right with me. They feel like something is wrong with them. So next time I come I’ll wear something different and I’ll do this or that. (Latasha)

My roommate sleeps with a lot of men. I said to my roommate “Don’t you worry about your reputation?” She said, “Girl I don’t care. I do what I want to. This is my body.” Things like that. (Latasha)
Some women have bad reputations, because, as Anderson (1990) noted, not only must young men have sexual conquests, but also they must prove it. Therefore, they must talk about sex and girls with other young men (Anderson, 1990). Others have reputations because of their sexual orientation. Anna said,

It’s a girl, I don’t know her name but she’s a lesbian, right. I see her all the time and I never knew she was one. I see her talking to males and females. This guy told me like, see her, she’s a lesbian. She comes in here all the time and she talks to this person and that person.

The standards for marriage and nonmarital relationships are different. Marriage at Club X is with the ‘good girl.’ For nonmarital relationships, the ideal woman may be identified at the club by frequency of attendance, skimpy clothing, and sexual dancing. Women believe that men perceive these women as ‘hard up’ and desperate for a man.

SEXUAL DANCING

The dancing is very sexual at Club X and, to some degree, mimics the physical act of sex. “Sexual dancing” takes place on the dance floor and while standing around watching people dance. Off the dance floor, some women dance in front of their boyfriends. For example, one night a woman was dancing with her back to her boyfriend. She put her “butt” in his crotch and proceeded to move in a circular motion against his genital area. He was not dancing, just standing. She took his beer out of his hand and took a few swallows and then handed it back to him. Then she continued dancing, which was really a grinding of his crotch area. Later, she turned around and danced face-to-face with him.

LaQuita said,

It’s just something they just like to do. I just dance regular. I hear guys say she can roll her body good. I bet she’s good in bed. I might see a guy dancing and say “Ooh, he’s something else” and I might
say a little something. Dancing is an indication of something else. Guys say, "Oh, she can get down. I'm going to try to get with her." I've seen it where a guy is laying on the floor and a girl is on top of him. Just dancing and stuff. I wouldn't do that, it's degrading.

Guys look at the way you dance. The guys check it out. Guys watch the way you dance. Guys watch the way you move when you dance. They figure if you can move like that on the dance floor you can do that in bed. It is important in terms of finding someone. If you can dance and move like that they are going to try to talk to you, even if you're ugly.

Dancing is part of the public performance in attracting a partner. The dance floor is a place to display and to pique the interests of potential suitors. Manning (1973) studied recreational clubs in Bermuda and described similar sexual dancing at clubs where men and women dance in sexually suggestive manners.

DATE SELECTION

In terms of selecting a date, attractiveness must be considered. Factors involved in attractiveness include not only biological appearance, but economic status and personality. Anna said,

I look at the way they're dressed, casual, decent, not too much jewelry. Then if he tries to talk to me I check out his attitude. See if he has that "ladies' man attitude." Does he think he's got it going on. Have I seen him with this girl and that girl every time I come. I watch the guys, what they do, how they talk, and how they act. I ask if they're talking to somebody else. If he says he doesn't have a girlfriend we can talk. I would have to get to know him before I go to bed with him. I'll tell him we need to be friends right now.

In describing the clothes men wear, Latasha said that,

Guys wear the Tommy Hilfiger. It's a little emblem on the shirt. You buy them at places like Palais Royal. The shirt runs from $65 on up. They are nice shirts, similar to the polo shirt, but it's Tommy Hill. They like to wear the Guess jeans and the Tommy Hill jeans. Then you have a few who like to put on some slacks and a nice shirt. Then you have ones that like to throw on jeans and a T-shirt. Sometimes
people try to tell how much money they have from what they wear. But you know what I’ve come to realize, like I might look at a guy and I’ll be like he’s dressed real sharp. He probably has a little money and what have you. But then once you get to know them, they really don’t have anything.

As for the women,

I’ve noticed some of the women like me like to put on a nice casual type outfit. Some of them like to wear the short short, daisy dukes you’d call them, I guess, with a little halter top to show off their breast, figure, what have you. You have some of them that don’t wear anything. . . . When I dress casual with bell bottoms, guys will be attracted to me. They’ll be like, “Hi, how are you doing.” But I noticed when I put on my daisy dukes, the men are “Ooh baby you look so cute” and I have men coming from everywhere. All out the woodwork with the daisy dukes on. I get a lot of stares for my physical appearance. But I don’t want them to like me for that. I want them to like me for what I am on the inside. (Anna)

Dress varies at the club. To some degree, this determines the likelihood that a man will approach a woman and also if the woman will be responsive. Manning (1973) noted that women in clubs used clothing as a symbol of sexuality:

Women’s fashions, in addition to projecting the mod and Afro images, are designed to enhance sex appeal. Flesh-clinging dresses with plunging necklines, miniskirts that suggestively expose the thighs, two-piece ensembles that daringly bare the midriff, hot pants outfits that accentuate the pubes, hips, and buttocks, and tight-fitting pants suits that gloriously contour the cantilevered dimensions of their wearers, are popular attire. (p. 157)

This raises the issue of how men think about women who wear little in the way of clothing. Latasha said some men look at them as “Ooh, they’re cheap.”

Some men look at them like that and some don’t. Most of the men, I come to realize now, they’re into sex. You know what I’m saying. That’s all they think about is sex. So when they see a woman dressed
like that they’re like “Wow, she’ll probably give it up easy.” So they go after her and try to pursue her and see what she’s all about and if they feel they can take her home they will. That’s when I noticed a lot of them will pull out their money. “Well here, I’ll buy you and your friends a drink.” That’s supposed to make you go “Wow. He has money so I might talk to him and go home with him.” Men love it. Most guys go “She’s a whore. She can give it up.” They look at another person, “She’s decent. She’s nice.” (Latasha)

So, depending on how you are dressed, men and women classify women as “decent” and “whore.” A decent person is someone with whom you have a relationship and a whore is someone you can go to bed with anytime.

Women know they’re getting a reputation but they figure they can get anybody they want. Some women wear the shorts real short. We call them “whore shorts.” Women like the attention. All eyes are on them. They catch all the men. They like the attention. When guys say that looks fine on you. They love the attention. (Anna)

For women, attention seems to be their focus. They dress in skimpy clothes although they may create a negative image. Then again, who determines that it is a negative image? To them, it is positive. They get the attention they desire.

Brooks (1995) discussed the “centerfold syndrome” and its impact on sexual relationships. The basic thesis of the syndrome is the belief among men (and women) that physically attractive women’s bodies are magnificent and men are destined to desire them. The centerfold syndrome has five components: voyeurism, objectification, the need for validation, trophyism, and the fear of true intimacy. In terms of voyeurism, the unique features of a woman’s or man’s physical appearance—the outline of a man’s biceps or contour of a woman’s breast in a dress—can be strong sexual stimuli. The harm in this is that glorification of the body leads to unreal images of women, creates an obsession with visual stimulation, and minimizes other aspects of a healthy psychosexual relationship (Brooks, 1995).

Objectification is related to voyeurism. In the centerfold syndrome, men observe women and therefore women are the object
and men are the objectifiers. In American society, men have the right to look at women and women are expected to accept the role of visual stimulators for men. When men see women as objects, imperfect women (those with varicose veins, cellulite legs, etc.) are less appealing. Also, one fantasy woman is not enough, because images that were exciting can soon cease to be so (Brooks, 1995). Outward physical features, clothes, jewelry, hairstyle and hair texture, and biological features are used to objectify both genders at Club X.

Men crave validation of their masculinity and view women’s bodies as an avenue for that validation. A woman has tokens to manhood (sex) that she can dispense whenever she likes. Although women may have little power in other spheres, women do have power in the sexual arena; this sets the background for misunderstandings and antagonisms between women and men (Brooks, 1995).

When women are viewed as objects, they also become trophies, testaments to a man’s power and skillful sexual performance. The trophy hunting man must realize that his prize eventually will lose her irresistible allure. Also, he can never be sure that the trophy will remain his (Brooks, 1995).

According to Brooks (1995), the centerfold syndrome “prevents real intimacy, mature discourse, and honest interpersonal connection, it creates barriers to understanding and becomes a significant obstacle to healthy relationships” (p. 12).

ECONOMIC INTERACTIONS

Part of the social interaction involves economic power plays. In Sexual Games in Black Male/Female Relations, Burgest (1990) discusses a variety of games played between Black men and women. Burgest calls one game “if you dance to the music, you got to pay the piper.” The aim of the performance is to create indebtedness in Black women to Black men. This is accomplished through economic and financial dependency. In return for economic favors provided by Black men, the woman is to provide sexual favors (Burgest, 1990). This may be observed in the simple offer to buy a
woman a drink (and maybe buy her friends a drink). "Some men think if you buy them a drink they have to be with them all night." Yvonne said she tells them that "If you buy me a drink it doesn’t mean that I’m going to be with you all night." A guy told me that if I buy you this drink, well I think you need to be with me. I told him, ‘Well, that’s okay. I’ll get my own drink.’"

Latasha had the following experience:

At [Club X], I had an experience with this guy that I had been knowing. He was kind of drunk. He bought me a drink and I was walking around, you know, looking for my friends and he saw me. He grabbed the drink out of my hand and poured it out. He just poured it out. He said, "Well, I wanted you to be with me," and I didn’t want to be with him. [She laughed]

He thought that she should be attentive to him because he bought her a drink.

Others don’t mind, they just want to buy you a drink. Some women at [Club X] might go to bed with someone because they bought them some drinks. It’s the dollar bill. One of my roommates probably feels obligated to go to bed with him if he buys her drinks and clothes. (Latasha)

This is popular among Black men who value property and economic resources. They use these resources as a means to manipulate and control women (Burgest, 1990).

Another game, played mainly by women, is "I won’t... if you don’t or you can’t... if you don’t." Black women negotiate with their bodies for favors in the relationship. Black men and women view sex as a commodity (Burgest, 1990). Women at Club X discussed money and clothes in exchange for sex. They look at the clothes men wear and the cars they drive to determine their economic potential.

Other guys may feel that you owe them if they buy you clothes or give you money. Others are girls who come out strictly to meet someone to go home with. I see them and they are always talking to
the guys in the flashy cars. Every time you see them. It's certain ones. I see them. One week she may be talking to somebody in a Lexus. Next time I see her she's talking to somebody in a BMW. My roommate will say something like, "Girl, we're going to go out tonight and I'm going to meet me a man in a Lexus." She doesn't necessarily go to bed with them, but that is what she is looking for. Some women do do that. We call them "car hoppers." They're not necessarily considered whores, but maybe. If someone acts, you know what I'm saying, if she likes flaunting herself, dressed like a slut. They are whores. (Anna)

I see girls that are like real wild. I don't know what they do. But just from hearing the conversation as I pass by, a guy might say, "Well, I want to take you home tonight," and he looks like a big spender. So the female might go home with him. Then you have some people like me who just like to go out and have fun. I'm a people person and I just like to go out, dance, socialize. (Yvonne)

There is a continual bartering system in Black female-male relationships.

MALE-FEMALE RELATIONSHIPS

I asked questions about the importance of a relationship and whether it is a status symbol.

It's security. I just got out of a relationship. I like to be in a relationship because of sexwise I don't like to have a lot of partners. I like to have one main partner and he's with me and no one else. Then again he could be with someone else. I always use protection. Security. Sometimes I wouldn't have money for rent and he'd say okay I'll pay your rent for you this month. I don't fool with a lot of females. So when I come home from work I'll talk to my boyfriend. This happened today. He knows that I'm talkative so if I come home and I'm quiet he's like, "What's wrong?" It's fun to do things, go to the movies, double date. (Anna)

So there are a variety of reasons for being in a relationship: security, companionship, and sex. It is also a status symbol. When asked this question, they all said, "Yes, pretty much so."
A prestigious guy might marry a woman because she has a degree and if we get together and get married we’ll have X amount of dollars. It’s a prestige thing. Then I see it leads to a unhappy marriage if they get married for the financial thing. (Yvonne)

Women don’t want to be alone. They want someone to hold them and tell them it’s going to be all right. You have to have a man. Everyone looks down on you if you’re not in a relationship. They ask why you’re not married yet. “Are you going to get married?” What do they say in the Bible, fornication is a sin. I would love to get married. Most people just go from one person to the next. It’s a cycle. It’s all about money. The younger generation are about he’s going to do this for me. Give me this, buy me this. If he’s not going to buy it, then the next person will. (Anna)

Also, if you’re not in a relationship, women feel that men think you’re a whore.

When guys see that some women don’t want to be in a relationship or want to be single, guys think that they’re whore hopping. They want to be with that man and that man. If you’re not in a relationship, you may be whore hopping. In terms of power in the relationship, men have the power. (Yvonne)

LaQuita said it is hard to say no to a man when you love him.

Hard to say “No, you can’t come over here.” I do want to see him. It’s hard to say no when you’re in love. It’s hard to say no you can’t kiss me. That’s how it is when you’re in love. That’s how weak you get when you’re in love. If he’s in my face it’s hard for me to say no. If we’re on the phone, no. Face to face is hard.

Most men have the upper hand. I figure if you know how to do it you can work it. If a man can satisfy you they have the upper hand because they know you want it. If a man is good in bed then he has control. Men have control because they have more money. For women if you don’t have that car and job they don’t want you. Men are the same way. Whoever has those things can be in control. If the man is good in bed it’s hard to say who has control. They may be controlling each other.

I noticed that it is difficult for women to say no during my interviews, as I noted in the journal I kept during the study:
One woman agreed to do the interview and then didn’t show up. I paged her and she never returned my call. I'm not going to page her again. If she didn’t want to take part she could have said so, but she didn’t. I wonder how they can negotiate condom use and sex when they can’t tell someone they don’t even know that they don’t want to be interviewed.

One woman felt that it is extremely important for a woman to be with a man.

There is no woman who wants to be alone without a man. Someone to hug, someone to care for them. Someone to be there for them. (Yvonne)

The man feels that he has power but I look at it as the woman has power. I've had several men say, “I don’t want to use a condom.” Well, if you don’t want to use a condom, then you don’t want to have sex. But you do have some individuals who feel, “Well, I don’t want to lose this guy so I'll just go along with what he says so I won’t use a condom this time.” (Yvonne)

This attitude goes along with the game, “if you love me, you will.” It is played by Black men and is usually introduced by young lovers who attempt to coerce a partner into a sexual encounter. The outcome of this game is for Black men to gain satisfaction against the explicit wishes of the woman (Burget, 1990).

Women feel that men are going to have more than one woman and there is nothing they can do about it. “Some men are never satisfied with one woman.”

My roommate has been with this guy for 3 years. The second year into the relationship he told her he had been dating someone else. He made that particular person his girlfriend, but he’s still messing with her. I feel like this, if you let it happen it will happen. I don’t like to play second fiddle. I like to be number one. But my momma told me, you may be number one but you’re not the only one. I believe it because a man is going to do what he wants to do. Some of them you can talk to them, mold them in a sense, but some of them: “I’m going to do this.” I’ve come to realize it’s a big ego thing too. “I had this girl this week and I can get her.” They like to see what they can do and how far they can go. It boosts their ego. (Latasha)
“This guy told me that sometimes I have to have more than one woman. It takes more than one woman to satisfy me.” LaQuita said she believes it.

Sometimes you lose the attraction. You don’t lose the feelings for the person you’re with, but there’s something different. I caught my boyfriend with another girl. He told me that the feeling wasn’t there any more. He said he loves me, but the feelings aren’t there any more. He said I still love and care for you, but the feelings aren’t there. It’s something different. He said he wanted to be single. We were going to break up and I agreed to it. He told me he loved me and didn’t want me to be with anyone else. When I caught him with the girl he said the girl doesn’t mean anything to him. They’re just friends. Now he said he wants to be with her. I said, “Last week you said something different. Why did you lie?” He said I didn’t lie. He can cut me off. He still calls me and comes by. He said it’s just something different. He came over yesterday . . . I would take him back because I’m in love with him. For four and a half years it was me and him. I can’t be with him while he’s with another woman. I can’t accept that. He said he was happy with this girl. I said, “Didn’t I make you happy?” He said, “You did, but the feeling isn’t there anymore.” I would still take him back because I miss him. I miss the time we spent together. Him taking me places. It’s hard for me to start over. I think it was because he didn’t have a decent job and wasn’t dressed. Now he has a new car and he’s dressing nice. He’s getting a lot of attention now. (LaQuita)

All men are going to have someone else. My dad is like that. He’s married. He’s been married for 17 years, but he’s out there. He has another woman. Stepmom might know and it’s security. She came up with hardly anything. My dad’s a chemical engineer. He brings home a lot of money. He has her living in a nice two-story house. She’s driving a Jag. He has a BMW. It’s security. As long as he’s bringing home the money he can do whatever. Then again, she might be naive and don’t know. My dad’s always going out of town. “Well, I’m flying to Dallas.” He doesn’t take her. Sometimes he does but a lot of times he doesn’t take her. When I was little I don’t know if he knew I wouldn’t tell or what, but I remember meeting a number of his girlfriends. One of them claimed that she was pregnant and he had a blood test and it wasn’t his. (Shontele)
Although they are young, one participant sees herself as “spoiled” and that she must get a mate before no one wants her. Shontele said,

Men are more interested in what’s untouched, in what’s pure. They’re not interested in a woman with a baby. Some men are more interested in women who are untouched, more pure and clean. Most men like women with the perfect measurements, no children, no sex or they only had a little sex, but you don’t know a lot about sex. You don’t have to have a mind or brain, you can be dumb, but you have the looks, the body. If I knew then what I know now my children would come a whole lot later and I wouldn’t have had as much sex as I did. I’m old to him now. I’m going to be really old as far as a spouse or partner is concerned in a few years. I’m worried about that. I worry about it all the time.

Women strive to show that they have had little in the way of sexual experience. In the recreational clubs studied by Manning (1973), there was no stigma from extramarital affairs. This is not true for women at Club X. Although some women admitted having past relationships with married men, such affairs are not considered acceptable behavior. The married man can provide short-term and long-term economic support, but they cannot provide the status symbol of “Mrs.”

Women at Club X may see the individual only for the night or have a longer-term relationship. However, a longer-term relationship with one individual does not necessarily exclude sexual contact with others.

BABY’S MOTHER

“Baby’s mother” is a special category. Two of the interviewees in this study were baby’s mother. Anna explained it the following way:

They are not called girlfriends. Your girlfriend is someone else, a completely different person. Everybody’s got one. Everybody has a baby’s mother. They have no plans to marry these people but they will do everything they can to be nice to them so they won’t file child support.
Many poor Black women have a prolife philosophy, and abortion is often not an option. Children are wanted regardless of the circumstances, and the child is genuinely valued. A baby brings a woman praise, a welfare check, and some independence (Anderson, 1990). Adult status is placed on women who become mothers (Collins, 1990).

Baby’s mother is a good position to be in for financial reasons and also because the woman has an ongoing relationship with the father. Baby’s mother is a socially prestigious position, and she may or may not date other men. Shontele said,

You’re sort of like property then. The father can always go back and sleep with the baby’s mother. It’s like a given. He’ll say I’ll give you money. She’ll say if you give me money I won’t file child support. It’s sort of like an intricate bartering system.

Anderson (1990) argued that because such men are unemployed or underemployed, they could not form economically self-reliant families, the usual marker of the transition to manhood. As a consequence, young men’s peer groups stress sexual activity to prove manhood, and a baby is proof of sexual activity. Young girls are lured to have sex by the hopes of love and marriage and may become pregnant and abandoned. Some view this as an opportunity to be eligible for welfare that allows them to establish their own households and to attract other men who need money. Anderson views it as a cultural manifestation of persistent urban poverty. Although the sexual codes of the youth in this ethnography probably do not differ from those of other young people, the consequences vary by social class. Exploitative sexual relationships are prevalent in all social classes, but middle-class youths have stronger interest in their future and realize that a pregnancy can derail that future (Anderson, 1990).

The girls have a dream, the boys a desire. The girls dream of being carried off by a Prince Charming who will love them, provide for them, and give them a family. The boys often desire sex without commitment or babies without responsibility for them. It becomes extremely difficult for the boys to see themselves taking on the
responsibilities of conventional fathers and husbands in view of their employment prospects. Yet the boy knows what the girl wants and plays that role to get sex. In accepting his advances, she may think she is maneuvering him toward a commitment or that her getting pregnant is the nudge he needs to marry her and give her the life she wants. What she does not see is that the boy, despite his claims, is often incapable of giving her that life. For in reality he has little money, few prospects for earning much, and no wish to be tied to a woman who will have a say in what he does. (Anderson, 1990, pp. 113-114)

This scenario outlines the dilemma faced by both genders in trying to form a sexual relationship. The bartering system has short-term gains but long-term disadvantages. Consequences of the bartering system for women are unplanned pregnancies, increased prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), continued poverty, and lowered quality of life, especially unhappiness.

DISCUSSION

Families in the United States have undergone significant demographic changes. These important changes include an overall decline in marriage rates, older ages at first marriage, a higher prevalence of births to unmarried women, increases in female-headed households, more children in female-headed households, and a larger percentage of children living in poverty. Although these trends affect both Blacks and Whites, Black families are disproportionately affected. In 1993, more than half of Black men (58%) and women (61%) in the United States were not married, compared with 41% of White women and 38% of White men. A large proportion of this decline in marriage occurred because of an increase in the percentage of those who were never married (Taylor, Tucker, Chatters, & Jayakody, 1997). Relative to other groups, Blacks will spend a greater percentage of their lives as singles (Tucker & Taylor, 1997). The declines in marriage have been offset by increases in cohabitation (Taylor et al., 1997). McLanahan and Casper (1995) suggested that because marriage differentials between White and Black women is equally high for mothers as for
nonmothers, the cause of the decline in marriage is similar for all women, not just mothers.

A number of theories have been put forth to explain the relatively high prevalence of "unmarriedness" among African Americans. These same theories may help elucidate observed patterns of male-female interpersonal relationships.

**SEX RATIO IMBALANCE**

There is a gender imbalance among Whites and Blacks, but not Hispanics. For example, the gender ratio in 1991 was 100 to 100 among Hispanics, 95 to 100 among Whites, and 88 to 100 for African Americans. This scarcity of men is more marked among young, sexually active age groups. The gender ratio imbalance for those below the poverty line is more striking than the overall figures. For instance, the gender ratio for those below the poverty level is 73 to 100, whereas the ratio drops to 69 to 100 among African Americans living in poverty (Aral, 1996).

Guttentag and Secord (1983) advanced the argument that societies with gender ratio imbalance have different patterns of marital values and social organization; shortage of men is related to more divorce, singlehood, adultery, out-of-wedlock births, transient relationships, less commitment among men to relationships, lower societal value on family and marriage, and a rise in feminism. They also argued that a shortage of men among African Americans is associated with an increase in extramarital childbearing and marital decline. Secord and Ghee (1986) also argued that this gender ratio imbalance destabilizes existing relationships because viable alternative mates are always available to the gender in short supply.

The gender ratio hypothesis considers how gender ratio imbalances interact with gender inequality to influence marriage patterns. Members of the scarcer gender have a bargaining advantage because they have more potential mates (Guttentag & Secord, 1983). But how members of the scarcer gender use their advantage depends on their structural power and control of economic and political resources. It is assumed that women depend on marriage for financial support and therefore use their bargaining power when
potential mates are abundant to marry, and they marry men with higher status than they otherwise could attract. Men are more likely to marry when the gender ratio is near 100. When women are scarce (i.e., when the ratio is less than 100), men are less likely to marry, and when men are in short supply (less than 100), they are also less likely to marry because they do not need commitment to gain sexual relationships (Guttentag & Secord, 1983).

Low gender ratios are also believed to weaken husbands' commitment to marriage because men do not place great value on marriage. Therefore, husbands provide fewer benefits to wives, which results in lower marital satisfaction for women than for men. A consequence of this scenario for married couples is higher risk of separation and divorce (Guttentag & Secord, 1983).

The African American gender ratio has declined since the 1920s. This disparity between the number of women and men is partly due to higher male mortality and increased female longevity (Taylor et al., 1997). However, researchers such as Epenshade (1985) noted that although Black gender ratios declined since the 1920s, marital decline did not begin until the 1960s.

**ECONOMIC FACTORS**

The declining economic condition of Black men also has been cited as a causative factor in the decline in marriage and bonding. The decline in the industrial sector, which provided employment for Black men without higher education, resulted in Black men being less attractive as potential husbands and also made them less confident that they could financially support a family (Darity & Myers, 1987; Wilson, 1987). Another economic explanation of marital decline is the growing disparity between Black female and male income levels and increased economic independence of women. Research indicates that the most economically independent Black women, those most highly educated, are more likely to marry than less educated women (Taylor et al., 1997). The effects of the gender ratio and employment on marital status are more evident under conditions of poverty (Taylor et al., 1997).
FEMINIST THEORY

Those who espouse the view that Black men experience more severe oppression than Black women and that therefore Black women must support Black male sexism do not consider the overarching gender ideology that constrains both Blacks and Whites (Collins, 1990).

Objectification of subordinate groups is part of domination and is central to female oppression.

The foundations of complex social hierarchy become grounded in the interwoven concepts of either/or dichotomous thinking. . . . Domination based on difference . . . implies relationships of superiority and inferiority, hierarchical bonds that mesh with political economies of race, gender, and class oppression. African American women occupy a position whereby the inferior half of a series of these dichotomies converge, and this placement has been central to our subordination. (Collins, 1990, p. 70)

Eurocentric gender ideology objectifies both genders. Some African American men believe that they can only be men by dominating Black women (Collins, 1990). Sexism and internalized sexism play major roles in the dynamics of Black male-female relationships.

CONCLUSIONS

Attributes of women’s beliefs and behaviors described in this article can be found in any club and among any ethnic group. These young people are not afraid to say how they feel. They want to have fun. They are “the hip hop generation,” a generation that is concerned about pleasure and enjoyment, and they are not afraid to say so. During the hippie movement, people talked about free love. However, they discussed it in political and liberation tones. Today, young people are living a free love devoid of the political rhetoric, sometimes pretentious, of the 1960s.

Karenga (1978) discussed Black female-male relationships. He said the dynamics of Black love fall within one of the following
categories: dependency connection, flesh connection, and the cash connection. According to Karenga, the root of social problems in Black male-female relationships rests on these stereotypical connections. However, these connections are probably more widespread and real than simply stereotypical. These connections form the base for many female-male relationships. In a society where women, especially Black women, have little social and economic status and power, these connections are survival strategies in a Eurocentric-structured world.

This study indicates the importance of social status, economic security, and male-female companionship among young adult African American women. The bartering of material resources, companionship, and social status in exchange for sex within a sexist context are driving forces in Black sexual interpersonal interactions. Although all men are viewed as unfaithful, women have unprotected sex because the relationship is more important than the perceived risk of STDs, including HIV. Having a baby is another way, like sex, to gain attention, social status, companionship, and economic security. It may be that African Americans are still in transition in terms of redefining female-male relationships in the New World Eurocentric environment. Poor Black women often use male-female bonding to attain companionship, social status, and economic security.

REFERENCES


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