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African American Mother–Daughter Communication About Sex and Daughters’ Sexual Behavior: Does College Racial Composition Make a Difference?

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Abstract

This study examined the influence of African American mothers’ communication about sexual topics on the sexual attitudes and behavior of their college-enrolled daughters. Daughters were enrolled at a historically Black college/university (HBCU) or a predominantly White institution (PWI) to assess whether and how college racial context might affect daughters’ sexual attitudes and behavior. Findings indicated that daughters at the HBCU had less permissive attitudes about premarital sex than their counterparts at the PWI. This result was especially true for daughters of mothers with more conservative attitudes about premarital sex and who discussed such topics infrequently. Last, the combination of positive mother–daughter communication and fewer discussions about sexual topics resulted in lower levels of sexual experience among the daughters.

Keywords

African Americans; mother–adolescent communication; psychosexual behavior; adolescence; college students

Families play a critical role in shaping the sexual attitudes and behaviors of adolescents and young adults (DiIorio, Pluhar, & Belcher, 2003). Previous research has identified several dimensions of parent–adolescent communication about sex that influence adolescents’ sexual attitudes and behaviors (Jaccard, Dodge, & Dittus, 2002; Lefkowitz, 2002). Research also suggests that positive African American mother–daughter relationships during adolescence delay pregnancy (Scott, 1993). Despite the numerous studies in this area, there has been limited attention devoted to African American adolescents living in more affluent contexts (Tolman, 1996). Consequently, current literature has limited applicability to upwardly mobile African American adolescents, particularly those making the transition to college.

This study extends the literature by investigating linkages between mother–daughter communication about sex and sexual outcomes in a sample of primarily middle-class African American females at a historically Black college/university (HBCU) and a

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predominantly White institution (PWI). This study examined (a) whether and how the type and quality of mother–daughter communication predicted daughters’ attitudes about premarital sex and their level of sexual experience and (b) whether the sexual attitudes and behavior of African American female college freshmen varied on the basis of the type of college they attended. This study also investigated whether the relationship between maternal communication about sexual topics and daughters’ level of sexual experience is moderated by the general communication context.

African American Mother–Daughter Communication About Sex and Adolescent Sexual Behavior

Most studies on parenting and sexual behavior among African American adolescents have focused on individuals residing in disadvantaged communities (e.g., Black, Ricardo, & Stanton, 1997). In general, studies demonstrated that African American girls from impoverished backgrounds were at greater risk for early sexual debut because of the specific features of the ecological contexts in which they grow up, including the high visibility of single motherhood (Burton, 1993) and permissive parental monitoring (Ensminger, 1990; Hogan & Kitagawa, 1985). Family conflict was also a risk factor for sexual debut in a recent longitudinal study examining predictors of sexual debut in African American adolescents from low-income families (McBride, Paikoff, & Holmbeck, 2003). Additionally, one study demonstrated that positive, supportive mother–child relationships characterized by open communication decreased likelihood of sexual debut among low-income African American adolescent girls (Moore & Chase-Lansdale, 2001). However, it is also important to consider sexual attitudes and behavior among African American adolescent girls from other socioeconomic backgrounds. Specifically, research would benefit from an examination of the experiences of college-enrolled African American females for whom factors such as poverty may be less associated with their experiences.

Campus racial composition is a potentially important ecological variable in understanding linkages between family communication patterns and sexual behavior in adolescents starting college. Consistent with ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1992), African American female adolescents may select a college (HBCU or PWI) in part because they believe that a particular campus milieu corresponds to their family’s standards regarding sexuality and dating. Staples (1981) and others have argued that some HBCUs reflect more conservative African American values and attitudes about sexuality as demonstrated by strict curfews for incoming freshmen, single-sex residence halls, and careful monitoring of visitors of the opposite sex. Such rules may be more appealing to some African American families who may consider these institutions to be more reflective of conservative psychosexual attitudes common in other African American institutions (e.g., churches). However, the perceived benefit of matriculating at a PWI for African American adolescents is unclear. Thus, examining communication patterns between mothers and daughters affiliated with racially different colleges presents an opportunity to capture variation in sexual attitudes and behavior not investigated in previous literature.

Moreover, the process of dating and mate selection may vary for daughters attending colleges with different racial compositions. Recent statistics have documented the sex ratio

imbalance among African American men and women on many college campuses (U.S. Department of Education, 2003), and this may affect the sex-related decisions made by African American daughters at HBCUs and PWIs in different ways. Hence, examining the sexual decision-making of such adolescents at the beginning of their college careers poses an opportunity to investigate how these processes unfold during this period of increased independence.

Dimensions of Mother–Adolescent Communication and Adolescent Sexual Behavior

Mothers often take a primary role in shaping children's attitudes and behaviors about sexuality (Kirkman, Rosenthal, & Feldman, 2002). Discussions about sexual topics also occur more frequently between mothers and daughters and the effect of such communication is stronger in mother–daughter dyads (DiIorio, Kelly, & Hockenberry-Eaton, 1999; Feldman & Rosenthal, 2000; Lefkowitz, Sigman, & Au, 2002). The frequency of parental communication about sexual topics appears to be related to adolescent sexual behavior; less frequent discussions are associated with a delay in first coitus, and more frequent discussions predict less sexual risk-taking (Lehr, DiIorio, Dudley, & Lipana, 2000; Miller, Benson, & Galbraith, 2001).

Another pathway in which mothers influence adolescents' sexual attitudes and behavior is through direct and indirect communication of their own attitudes about sexuality (Dittus, Jaccard, & Gordon, 1999). Some studies have shown that more conservative maternal attitudes about premarital sex predicted less sexual experience among Latino and African American adolescents (Hovell et al., 1994; Jaccard, Dittus, & Gordon, 1996). Similarly, when mothers endorse more permissive attitudes about sexuality, so do their adolescent children (Whitbeck, Simons, & Kao, 1994).

In addition to these findings, growing evidence suggests that the impact of maternal attitudes about adolescent sexual behavior is moderated by contextual variables related to other aspects of mother–daughter communication and the family environment (Miller et al., 2001). For example, recent studies suggest that good communication between parents and children about general topics appears to create a context for the discussion of more sensitive topics related to sexual behavior. One study suggested that adolescents who reported having meaningful discussions with their parents were more likely to report having also discussed sexual topics with their parents, including the dangers associated with sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and birth control (Raffaelli, Bogenschneider, & Flood, 1998). Evidence also suggests that frequency of parent–adolescent discussions about sex and condom use in an open, supportive context is associated with increased likelihood of adolescents discussing sex and condom use with their partners (Whitaker, Miller, May, & Levin, 1999). These findings illustrate that positive communication, in general, between mothers and adolescents may be most relevant when considered in concert with other aspects of communication that are more specific to sex.

In summary, consideration of multiple maternal influences is necessary to understand how these linkages operate together to shape daughters' sexual attitudes and behavior (Feldman

& Rosenthal, 2000). It is proposed that various dimensions of the communication process between mothers and daughters interact to affect the development of daughters' sexual attitudes and behaviors. For instance, it is possible that mothers who deliver more permissive or conservative messages about premarital sex in a supportive context may have daughters that are more likely to endorse similar attitudes about premarital sex and corresponding sexual behavior (Lefkowitz, 2002; Pluhar & Kuriloff, 2004; Taris & Semin, 1997). The present study sought to examine whether the general communication context between African American mothers and daughters shapes the degree to which mothers' discussions about sexual topics influence daughters' sexual behavior.

This study had two goals: (a) to investigate mother–adolescent communication in African American freshmen daughters, and (b) to compare differences in mother–daughter communication between daughters attending a HBCU and those attending a PWI. Consistent with previous literature, the first hypothesis predicted that less conservative maternal attitudes about premarital sex and more communication about sexual topics would predict more permissive attitudes about premarital sex. Second, it was hypothesized that mothers and daughters at the HBCU would have more similar attitudes about premarital sex than would mothers and daughters at the PWI. Third, it was predicted that positive general communication between mothers and daughters, less conservative maternal attitudes about sex, and maternal communication about sexual topics would be associated with greater sexual experience in daughters. Fourth, the relationship between maternal communication about sexual topics and daughters' sexual experience would be moderated by the level of general mother–daughter communication.

Method

Sample

The sample consisted of 75 African American heterosexual late-adolescent females and their biological mothers. All adolescents were college freshman. Thirty-six mother–daughter pairs were affiliated with a private, selective HBCU located in a major mid-Atlantic metropolitan city. Thirty-nine pairs were affiliated with a selective, public PWI located in a college town in the mid-Atlantic region. The median age for the sample was 18 years.

The median age for the mothers was 46 years. The mothers ranged in age from 34 to 57 years of age. In terms of marital status, 4% of the mothers had never married, 60% were married, 19% were divorced, 15% were separated, and 2% were widowed. The median level of education achieved by mothers in the sample was a bachelor's degree. The level of education ranged from some high school to a doctoral degree (e.g., PhD or EdD). The median annual household income was between \$50,000 and \$59,000. Approximately 33% of the sample reported annual household incomes of \$49,000 per year or less. The middle third of the sample reported incomes between \$50,000 and \$89,000, and the upper 33% reported annual household incomes of \$90,000 or more per year. Married and previously married mothers are overrepresented in the sample on the basis of census data (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001, 2003). The sample also contained an overrepresentation of families with household incomes exceeding the national median of \$36,399 for 1997, the year in which the data were collected (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004).

Measures

General communication—General communication was measured by the Communication subscale of the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA; Armsden & Greenberg, 1987). The Communication subscale is a 10-item subscale assessing the adolescent's perception of the quality of general communication between adolescent and mother ($\alpha = 0.88$). The measure has been used successfully in other studies with samples of African American adolescents (e.g., Moore & Chase-Lansdale, 2001; Smetana & Gaines, 1999). Sample items from the subscale include the following: "I like to get her point of view on things I'm concerned about," and "I tell her about my problems and troubles." The response format ranged from 1 (*never true*) to 5 (*almost always true*), with higher scores indicating more positive perceptions of mother–daughter communication.

Mothers' communication about sexual topics—A seven-item questionnaire was used to assess mothers' perceptions of the degree to which they discussed various sexual topics with their daughters throughout the daughters' childhood. Adapted from previous research (Fox & Inazu, 1980), topics assessed included the biological aspects of fertilization, menstruation, dating, contraception, and for STD/HIV prevention, and premarital sexual intercourse. An item that assessed the frequency in which mothers gave daughters reading material or videos about any of the aforementioned topics was also included. The items were scored on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*frequently [several times a month during childhood]*). Higher scores indicated more frequent communication about sexual topics ($\alpha = 0.83$).

Mothers' conservative attitudes about premarital sex—A three-item scale was created used to obtain an index of mothers' conservative attitudes regarding premarital sex. The first two items stated "I believe that women should postpone sexual intercourse until after marriage," and "I believe that my daughter should postpone sexual intercourse until after marriage." Mothers responded to both items on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The third item asked mothers to rate the extent to which they discussed with their daughters having sex before marriage in relation to their religious beliefs. The response format ranged from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*frequently [several times a month throughout daughters' childhood]*). Because the first two items had a response scale that differed from the third, all items were standardized and summed. Higher scores represented more conservative attitudes about premarital sex ($\alpha = 0.84$).

Adolescents' permissive attitudes about premarital sexual behavior—The Revised Reiss Pre-Marital Sexual Permissiveness Scale (Sprecher, McKinney, Walsh, & Anderson, 1988) measured daughters' permissive attitudes about premarital sexual behavior. The 15-item scale measures the degree to which daughters agreed with the appropriateness of 18-year-olds engaging in various sexual behaviors (e.g., kissing, petting, sexual intercourse) in five relational contexts ranging from first date to engagement. To gain an index of daughters' permissive attitudes about premarital sex in committed relationships, a subscale was created with nine items assessing attitudes about premarital sex in more intimate, committed relationships (e.g., serious relationships, preengagement, and engagement). The scale yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.97. Sample items included the

following: “I believe that heavy petting is acceptable for an 18-year-old female who is seriously dating her partner,” and “I believe that sexual intercourse is acceptable for an 18-year-old female who is engaged with her partner.” The response format ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), with higher scores indicating more endorsement of pre-marital sex.

Adolescents’ level of sexual experience—Daughters completed the Sexual Activity Scale (Hovell et al., 1994), an ordinal scale of sexual practices designed to reflect the likely sequence of sexual experiences that many adolescents follow. The scale was revised slightly for the present study to reduce heterosexual bias by including two additional items for oral sexual contact between females and to assess experience with anal sexual contact separate from other behaviors. The scores range from 0 (*no sexual activity*) to 12 (*anal intercourse or oral–anal contact*). Respondents indicated the highest level of sexual behavior they experienced.

Procedure

Data were collected during the fall semester of the 1997–1998 academic year at both institutions. Both the HBCU and the PWI are selective, research-intensive institutions with national reputations, and both offer doctoral training in a variety of disciplines, including the arts and sciences, medicine, law, and business. The HBCU had an African American undergraduate enrollment of 88%, compared with an enrollment of 10% at the PWI. The PWI’s total European American undergraduate enrollment was 72%. All the participants at the HBCU and 68% of the participants at the PWI were recruited through the introductory psychology courses as a part of the course requirements. The remaining 32% of the PWI participants were recruited through advertisements, because there were fewer African American students enrolled in psychology courses at the PWI. There were no significant differences between students recruited through psychology courses and those recruited through advertisement on the outcome variables (i.e., permissive attitudes, level of sexual experience).

After providing informed consent, students completed a survey packet in small groups. To maintain confidentiality of responses, trained African American female research assistants provided participants with identification numbers and envelopes in which to place completed questionnaires. Afterward, the research assistants asked permission to contact the participants’ mothers. Students recruited from psychology courses received experimental credit for the study, whereas students recruited outside psychology courses received \$10. All students received \$10 if their mothers returned a survey.

Mothers completed questionnaires and returned them by postal mail. Survey materials were designed to be culturally appealing¹ to increase the likelihood that mothers would return the surveys (Dillman, 1978). In addition to receiving general information about how to participate and receive payment, each mother received a personalized, detailed cover letter appealing directly to the perspective and experiences of African American women and the

¹I created a project name and logo and duplicated the questionnaires on paper with Afrocentric colors.

importance of research in understanding them. The letter addressed potential concerns about cultural bias directly and informed participants that African American women created and executed the project, that participation was confidential, and that interpretation of results would be executed in a culturally sensitive manner. Nonresponsive mothers were contacted by telephone to inquire about their interest in the study and to request that surveys be returned. The overall response rate for the sample mothers was 82% (91% for PWI; 75% for HBCU).

Results

Plan of Analysis

Two hierarchical regression analyses were completed that tested the separate effects of college affiliation and maternal communication variables on daughters' permissive attitudes about sex and level of sexual experience. Because of the ratio of potential predictor variables relative to the sample size, selection of predictor variables was based on efforts to conserve statistical power. Using the existing literature and the study hypotheses as a guide, predictor variables were selected that were most relevant to the two outcome variables (permissive sexual attitudes and level of sexual experience) and that had significant correlations ($p < .05$) in either the full sample or the college subsamples. Hence, the regression model for each outcome variable contained a different subset of predictors based on these criteria. These data presented several options for the creation of interaction terms. Because the data contained two subsamples, interaction terms combining college with communication variables that explored patterns at the correlation level received priority. In particular, correlational patterns that suggested differences between the colleges were explored in interactional terms.

All maternal communication variables were centered at zero to reduce mathematically caused multicollinearity. Continuous variables were standardized ($M = 0$, $SD = 1$). College affiliation, a dichotomous variable, was weight-effect coded to adjust for the number of cases for the dependent variables. The weight-effect codes for adolescents' permissive attitudes and level of sexual experience were $-.49$ for the PWI and $.51$ for the HBCU. Variance inflation factors (VIFs) were examined as a check of multicollinearity, and all were within an acceptable range. A check for outliers was performed by examining Cook's D values, and no outliers were detected. Procedures outlined by Aiken and West (1991) were used to interpret statistically significant interactions. In each interaction, scores were computed by inserting specific values (1 standard deviation above and 1 below the mean) for each variable to facilitate interpretation.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics are provided in Table 1. To test for differences between the subsamples, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted on demographic variables (e.g., mother's age, income, education), communication variables, and adolescent sexual outcome variables (e.g., permissive attitudes, level of sexual experience). No significant differences emerged between the college samples on the study variables, $F(8, 70) = 1.79$, *ns*. Fifty-seven percent of the sample reported having had consensual sexual

intercourse at least once before the study. Among the sexually active daughters, age at first intercourse ranged from 12 years to 18 years. A chi-square analysis and an analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicated no difference between colleges for the percentage of daughters who reported consensual sexual intercourse, $\chi^2 (1, N = 74) = 0.26, ns$; or on age at first intercourse, $F(1, 42) = 1.01, ns$.

Correlation Matrices

Table 2 includes correlations for the entire sample, followed by correlations for the college subsamples in Table 3. Few significant relationships were evident between demographic covariates (i.e., mothers' age, mothers' education, household income) and the outcome variables (i.e., adolescents' permissive attitudes and level of sexual experience). Hence, demographic variables were dropped from further analyses to conserve statistical power. Findings for the entire sample suggest that mothers' conservative attitudes were negatively correlated with daughters' permissive attitudes ($r = -.36, p < .01$). Thus, mothers who believed it important to delay sexual intercourse until after marriage had some influence in shaping somewhat more conservative sexual attitudes in their daughters. However, results also indicate that mothers' communication about sexual topics such as menstruation, dating, contraception, STDs, and premarital sex was directly related, albeit minimally so, to the level of sexual experience in daughters ($r = .28, p < .05$). These bivariate findings for the full sample point to the importance of considering the scope, content, and context of mother–daughter communication where sex-related topics are concerned.

The pattern of correlations differed somewhat for the college subsamples (see Table 3). Mothers' conservative attitudes and daughters' permissive attitudes were negatively correlated in the HBCU sample ($r = -.64, p < .01$). In the HBCU sample, general communication and level of sexual experience were negatively correlated ($r = -.46, p < .01$). Similarly, communication about sexual topics and level of sexual experience were positively correlated in the HBCU sample only ($r = .36, p < .05$). In the PWI sample, there was no relationship between general communication and either outcome variable. Mothers' conservative attitudes and daughters' permissive attitudes were not correlated in the PWI sample. A moderate positive correlation was found for the PWI sample between adolescents' permissive attitudes and their level of sexual experience ($r = .51, p < .01$). On the basis of these findings, it is important to examine the potential effects of the on daughters' attitudes and behavior when indicators are considered simultaneously.

Mother–Daughter Communication, College Setting, and Daughters' Permissive Sexual Attitudes

As noted earlier, hierarchical regression modeling allows for tests of possible separate effects of college affiliation, communication variables, and their interactions on daughters' attitudes and behavior regarding sex. When college affiliation and communication variables are considered alone in Model 1 (Step 1), daughters from the HBCU tended to hold less permissive attitudes about premarital sex than their counterparts from the PWI ($b = -0.95$). Consistent with predictions, maternal communication about sexual topics positively predicted the attitudes of the daughters in the sample ($b = 0.13$). Last, mothers' conservative

attitudes regarding sex was negatively associated with permissive attitudes about sex among their daughters ($b = -0.30$). These results are shown in Table 4.

Given the possible joint influence of current (i.e., college setting) and previous context (i.e., maternal conservative attitudes, communication about sexual topics), it was important to examine interaction effects (Model 1, Step 2). Overall, daughters at the HBCU were more likely to endorse attitudes consistent with their mothers' views, whether the topic is conservative views about premarital sex ($b = -0.60$) or information about negotiating sexual relationships ($b = 0.17$). Specifically, results indicated that daughters at the HBCU were less likely to endorse permissive sexual attitudes when their mothers were conservative. When mothers' communication about sex was considered, results indicated that permissive attitudes about sex among daughters from the HBCU were higher when mothers communicated more about sexual topics. In both cases, no such pattern was detected among mothers and daughters at the PWI as shown in Figure 1. The full model explained 46% of the variance in daughters' permissive sexual attitudes, $F(5, 66) = 11.30, p < .001$, which included a 22% increase with the addition of the interaction terms ($p < .001$).

Mother–Daughter Communication, College Setting, and Daughters' Sexual Experience

A second hierarchical regression tested whether college affiliation, general communication, maternal conservative attitudes, and communication about sexual topics would be associated with sexual experience among daughters. In contrast to model results for permissive attitudes, there was no difference in sexual experience among daughters at the HBCU and the PWI. Moreover, the degree to which mothers expressed conservative attitudes about premarital sex was unrelated to their daughters' sexual experience. However, model results did partially support the hypothesis that more maternal communication about sexual topics ($b = 0.25$) would predict more sexual experience and that less positive general communication ($b = -1.30$) would predict less sexual experience in daughters. To examine the joint effects of general communication and communication about sexual topics on daughters' sexual behavior, an interaction term was entered into the Model 2 (Step 2). Results supported the fourth hypothesis that general communication context would moderate the relationship between maternal communication about sexual topics and daughters' level of sexual experience. The results for the full model are shown in Table 4.

Calculation of simple main effects revealed that, in circumstances in which communication between mothers and daughters was poor, the degree to which mothers communicated about sex was unrelated to daughters' sexual behavior ($b = -0.05, ns$). However, when daughters report good general communication with mothers, they were more likely to have pursued sexual experiences when mothers communicated frequently with them about sexual topics ($b = 0.54, p < .001$). The graph of the interaction is shown in Figure 2. The full model explained 23% of the variance in daughters' level of sexual experience, $F(5, 71) = 4.01, p < .01$.

Discussion

This study examined the effects of African American mother–daughter communication on daughters' sexual attitudes and behaviors and whether such attitudes and actions differed on

the basis of college racial composition. Although causal relationships should not be inferred, this study is important because it systematically tests possible influences of socialization factors before entering college and those factors which young females are exposed to on entering this new setting. These findings are important for academic and applied reasons and are particularly germane, given the long-term repercussions of sexual risk-taking on quality of life (Kotchick, Shaffer, & Forehand, 2001).

First, findings suggested the crucial role of maternal communication in predicting the sexual attitudes and behaviors of college-enrolled daughters. Mothers with conservative attitudes about sex tended to have daughters with less permissive attitudes on the subject. Mothers who recalled more frequent discussions with daughters about sexual topics had daughters who endorsed more permissive attitudes about premarital sex. Furthermore, results highlighted the importance of college setting in understanding linkages between various aspects of mother–daughter communication and daughters’ sexual attitudes and behaviors.

In general, results largely supported the hypotheses with some exceptions. Mothers who expressed conservative attitudes toward premarital sex were more likely to have daughters who rejected permissive sexual norms in committed romantic relationships. This was especially true among mothers and daughters enrolled at the HBCU. Consistent with the first hypothesis, more discussions about sexual topics between mothers and daughters were associated with more permissive attitudes among daughters. Partial support occurred for the third hypothesis regarding daughters’ sexual experience. Mothers who discussed sexual topics more frequently throughout their daughters’ childhood had daughters who were more sexually experienced on entering college. Furthermore, daughters who had better general communication with their mothers were less sexually experienced. Results did support the fourth hypothesis stating that general communication moderated the relationship between communication about sex and daughters’ sexual experience. This finding suggests that daughters engage in less sexual activity only when they have good general communication *and* when mothers discuss the topic of sex less often.

As stated previously, college racial composition played a pivotal role in illuminating patterns of communication among mothers and daughters in this sample. These data suggest that daughters selected into the colleges that were more congruent with both their mothers’ and their own attitudes about premarital sex. When considered in conjunction with the mission of HBCUs to educate African Americans (Freeman & Thomas, 2002), these aspects of campus life are likely to be reassuring to parents seeking to ensure that the cultural environment will reinforce their values and increase chances of success in college. In either case, it seemed that mothers of daughters at the HBCU were more successful in influencing their daughters to adopt similar belief systems whether they were more conservative or mainly focused on providing information about sexual topics. The reason for the absence of similarities between sexual attitudes and communication between mothers and daughters at the PWI is unclear. It is possible that these mothers were less successful in getting their daughters to adopt their beliefs about premarital sex regardless of the content. In light of the limited research in this area, these interpretations are speculative. Given that only two universities were sampled in the present study, it is not certain that the same pattern would

occur with other samples from HBCUs or PWIs. Clarification of these patterns should be the subject of future research.

These results support previous research suggesting that good *general* communication is important for the successful communication of *sexual* information to daughters and can affect sexual decision-making (Raffaelli et al., 1998). When considered in terms of the increased independence associated with the transition to college, good mother–daughter communication appears to increase the likelihood that daughters will retain these attitudes in their new setting. Contrary to predictions, mothers’ conservative attitudes did not predict daughters’ actual sexual behavior. This latter finding might be the result of limited statistical power available to test these relationships. It may also reflect the challenges posed by the sex ratio imbalance between African American women and men on some college campuses and the competition it creates for African American male romantic partners (McNair & Prather, 2004). The fact that undergraduate African American women outnumbered their male counterparts at a rate of almost 2 to 1 at both institutions in this study suggests that women may have been struggling with this issue on both campuses. Thus, the lack of a relationship between mothers’ desire for their daughters’ sexual modesty may reflect daughters’ difficulty adhering to maternal expectations in the presence of competition for African American male romantic partners on campus (Johnson & Staples, 2005).

These findings have theoretical implications for understanding parent–adolescent communication and adolescent sexual behavior among African Americans. Specifically, more studies of African American adolescents and young adults residing in ecological contexts beyond urban, impoverished communities are needed to grasp a more complete portrait of normative development of sexual behavior in this population (García Coll et al., 1996; Murry, 1996). Furthermore, more attention should be devoted to the influence of the cultural context of sexual behavior and mother–daughter communication about sex in upwardly mobile African American families (Wyatt, 1997). One way this can be accomplished is to measure the reasons for mothers’ attitudes about premarital sex. For instance, it is possible that African American mothers with college-bound daughters use different sexual communication strategies based on different beliefs about how to help them accomplish educational goals. Mothers who are more concerned that early sexual activities may derail educational goals may be more conservative. Alternatively, mothers who are less conservative may believe that frequent communication about sexual topics is the best way to facilitate mature decision-making by daughters about sex once they leave home. I hope that this study will stimulate research that advances the understanding of these processes.

These findings also have implications for therapists and campus health care professionals working with African American women regarding the strategies to negotiate sexual decision-making in their romantic relationships on campus. These results illuminate considerable variation in the sexual socialization practices in this population. Given the alarmingly high rates of HIV/AIDS in African American women (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2005), family therapists working with college-bound African American young women should consider how sexual socialization has occurred in the family of origin when it is relevant to issues in treatment. In some of the families in this study, mothers’ encouragement of sexual modesty did not always translate into daughters’

behaviors, despite their similarity in beliefs. Hence, it is important that professionals be aware that some families are more conservative about sexuality, and reluctance to discuss the consequences of sex can occur in some upwardly mobile African American families. Educating parents and their daughters about the risks inherent in sexual contact can be one means by which practitioners can help young women make healthy, informed decisions about sex.

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Figure 1.
Interaction of college affiliation and mothers' communication variables on adolescents' permissive attitudes.

Figure 2.

Interaction of mothers' communication about sex and adolescents' perception of general communication on adolescents' level of sexual experience.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables for Full Sample and By College

Variable	HBCU		PWI		Full sample	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
General communication quality	3.75	0.69	3.69	0.70	3.72	0.69
Communication about sex	20.81	3.85	20.34	4.78	20.57	4.33
Mothers' conservative attitudes	0.15	2.48	0.01	2.74	0.07	2.60
Adolescents' permissive attitudes	4.92	1.97	5.87	1.26	5.41	1.69
Level of sexual experience	8.97	3.46	8.23	4.25	8.59	3.87
Age at first intercourse	15.48	1.50	16.00	1.86	15.71	1.67
Ever had heterosexual intercourse?	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
%	61	39	55	45	58	42

Note. *ns* = 39 for the predominantly White institution (PWI) sample, and 36 for the historically Black college/university (HBCU) sample. *N* = 75 for full sample.

Table 2

Correlations Among Predictors and Outcomes for the Full Sample

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Mothers' age	–							
2. Mothers' education	.33**	–						
3. Household income	.24*	.55**	–					
4. General communication	–.06	–.09	–.12	–				
5. Communication about sex	–.05	.07	.08	.06	–			
6. Mothers' conservative attitudes	.01	.04	.22+	–.05	–.04	–		
7. Adolescents' permissive attitudes	–.06	.01	–.16	–.02	.17	–.36**	–	
8. Adolescents' level of sexual experience	–.19	.06	.01	–.15	.28*	.19	.34**	–

Note. N = 75.

+ p < .10.

* p < .05.

** p < .01.

Table 3

Correlations of Predictor and Outcome Variables for the College Subsamples

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
PWI sample								
1. Mothers' age	–							
2. Mothers' education	.26	–						
3. Household income	.18	.42**	–					
4. General communication	–.10	.02	–.08	–				
5. Mothers' communication about sexual topics	–.03	.05	.04	.11	–			
6. Mothers' conservative attitudes	–.03	–.10	–.30	.05	–.28	–		
7. Adolescents' permissive attitudes	–.17	–.01	.17	–.07	.18	–.04	–	
8. Adolescents' level of sexual experience	–.08	.09	.08	.05	.22	.31	.51**	
HBCU sample								
1. Mothers' age	–							
2. Mothers' education	.45**	–						
3. Household income	.33*	.67**	–					
4. General communication	.01	–.24	–.16	–				
5. Mothers' communication about sexual topics	–.07	.09	.12	.01	–			
6. Mothers' conservative attitudes	.03	.04	–.14	–.17	.28	–		
7. Adolescents' permissive attitudes	–.02	.07	.22	.03	.22	–.64**	–	
8. Adolescents' level of sexual experience	.33*	–.02	–.10	–.43**	.36*	–.01	.31	–

Note. *ns* = 39 for the predominantly White institution (PWI) sample and 36 for the historically Black college/university (HBCU) sample.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

Table 4
Results of Hierarchical Regression Models for Daughters' Permissive Attitudes and Level of Sexual Experience

Step and variable	Model 1: Daughters' permissive attitudes			Model 2: Daughters' level of sexual experience		
	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
Step 1						
College	-.95**	0.31	-.28	0.91	0.81	.12
Mothers' conservative attitudes	-.30***	0.06	-.46	0.13	0.16	.09
Mothers' communication about sexual topics	0.13***	0.04	.34	0.25**	0.09	.28**
General communication	–	–	–	–1.30*	0.61	–.24*
Step 2						
College × Conservative Attitudes	–0.60***	0.12	–.46	–	–	–
College × Communication About Sexual Topics	0.17*	0.08	.22	–	–	–
General Communication × Communication About Sexual Topics	–	–	–	0.43**	0.15	.32
R ²	.24***			.14*		
R ²	.46***			.23**		

Note. For Model 1, $F(5, 66) = 11.30$, $p < .001$. For Model 2, $F(5, 66) = 4.01$, $p < .01$. Weight effect coding for college; PWI = –.49, and HBCU = .51. PWI = predominantly White institution; HBCU = historically Black college/university.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.