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Black Women with Multiple Sex Partners:

The Role of Sexual Agency

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Abstract

Motivations of low-income substance using heterosexual Black women in New York City for having multiple sexual partners are explored in this paper. Analysis of in-depth interviews with 50 study participants demonstrates that their relationships consisted of those who had: (1) a main sex partner and a secondary sex partner; or (2) two or more “casual” partners. Individual-level motivations for extra relational sex fell into four dominant themes: sexual pleasure, partner infidelity, sex exchange and past main partners. Using a Black feminist framework, we describe how participants displayed considerable autonomy by actively forming and withdrawing from sexual relationships with men. However, women described low rates of condom use with main partners and inconsistent use of condoms with more casual sexual partners. This contradiction becomes an important area for sexual health interventions. Women who had sexual relations with only one current mate in the past two years were recruited as a monogamous comparison group.

Keywords

Agency; Black women; AIDS/HIV; condoms; multiple sex partners; female sexuality

Introduction

This qualitative paper will describe how a sample of low-income substance using Black women in New York City demonstrated contradictory empowerment in their sexual relationships with men: they were active in choosing varying types of male partners but had irregular patterns of condom use. This disjuncture is potentially a crucial location for sexual health intervention. Black feminist thought will be used to interpret the meanings study participants gave to their sexual relationships. This framework is useful as it constructs theory based on the experiences of Black women and recognizes their capacity to be active agents in creating their social world and personal lives (Stephens & Phillips, 2005). Black

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feminist thought also recognizes that race and racism contribute to experiences understood as common for Black women in the United States. It posits that these experiences and Black women's responses to them may actually vary greatly. In addition, it emphasizes the link between experiences and ideas and the ways in which action and thought construct one another. Finally, Black feminist thought acknowledges its relationship to other social justice movements (Collins, 2000). This theory has the potential to inform this study of concurrent sexual partnerships among a sample of Black women because: it demonstrates the relevance of larger structural forces on the lives of study participants; allows for an analysis of the different meanings respondents gave to their varying sexual relationships; and makes possible linking these ideas and experiences to a broader sexual health movement.

Black women have historically been the target of racialized, stigmatizing stereotypes that continue to be reinforced in popular culture such as social media, hip hop music, videos (Layne 2014) and more recently, reality TV shows (Ford, 2011). These cultural images have served as justifications to discriminate against and discredit Black women, particularly those who are low-income as they bear the brunt of racial, gender and class biases. Foundational archetypes of Black women such as the Jezebel, Mammy, Matriarch and Welfare Mother "remain influential frameworks of African American female sexuality" (Stephens & Phillips, 2005: 39). More recent cultural images include the Freak, Gold Digger, Diva and Dyke, Baby Mama, Earth Mother, and Bad Bitch (French, 2013; Layne, 2014). These racialized sexual stereotypes limit the sexuality of Black women and may be internalized by them (Stephens & Phillips, 2003).

Recent studies of sexual risk among Black adults have focused on relationship status and transformations. For example, Noar et al. (2012) provide an in-depth exploration of the distinctions between different types of casual partners and demonstrate how partner types are socially developed. Our research builds on this work by studying women with casual partners *and* main partners. There is a growing literature on Black men with concurrent female sex partners (see, for example, Bowleg, 2004; Bowleg et al., 2011; Carey, Senn, Seward, & Vanable, 2010; Dunlap, Benoit, & Graves, 2013; Fosse, 2010; Frye, Williams, Bond, Henny, & Cupid, 2013; Pass, Benoit, & Dunlap, 2014; Paxton, Williams, Bolden, Guzman, & Harawa, 2013) but much less has been written about Black heterosexual women who have multiple sex partners. Exceptions include Grieb, Davey-Rothwell & Latkin (2012), who describe individual and partner characteristics linked to main partner concurrency. In addition, Nunn et al. (2012) explore the social determinants of concurrent partnerships in a sample of urban Black women. Although these works contribute to social and individual level data on Black women's sexual concurrency, the role of agency is overlooked. Recognizing all elements of Black women's sexual partnerships, including power and assertiveness, is important as they have higher rates of sexual concurrency than white and Hispanic women (Adimora et al., 2002). This is significant because the majority of new HIV infections among Black women are due to heterosexual contact (National Center for HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis, STD and TB Prevention [NCHHSTP], 2014). This study therefore explores the role sexual agency plays in Black women's concurrent sexual relationships and associated condom use.

Research Methods

Data for this paper comes from in-depth interviews for a qualitative study of socialization and HIV risk among low-income, heterosexual, substance using women in New York City that was funded by the National Institutes of Health. Trained ethnographers recruited women 18 to 50 years old who self-identified as Black and heterosexual and had four or more lifetime sexual partners and at least two sexual partners in the two past years. Women who had sexual relations with only one current mate in the past two years were recruited as a monogamous comparison group. Staff targeted neighborhoods known from previous research and conducted additional ethnographic mapping in all five boroughs of New York City. They went to various New York City Housing Authority housing developments and low-income neighborhoods, local social events, community centers and medical clinics, where they handed out fliers and spoke to residents about the study. Snowball sampling, a method also used in related studies of Black women's sexual health (Ethier, 2006; Foreman, 2003) and research on HIV sexual risk (Syvertsen et al., 2012; Kendall, 2008) was also used to tap into networks of potential participants. To be eligible for the study, participants also had to report illicit drug sales or use in the previous year, because one of our research aims was to examine how drug involvement contributes to HIV risk. Women whose income was more than \$35,000 were excluded, in order to account for possible public benefits and child support.

Study participants gave written informed consent and were asked to invent code names for themselves and for any sexual partners mentioned. These names reflect the complexity of agency as they may appear to reproduce sexualized stereotypes of Black women. However, these self-determined aliases may also reveal participants' confidence in their sexuality or an opportunity to "play" with a different role if only for the duration of the interview. Respondents were not asked why they chose their particular code names and consequently the authors do not have data on the meanings these alternate names had for them. We refrained from changing the aliases interviewees chose for themselves as that would replicate and contribute to the power imbalance between researcher and study participant.

Research participants completed in-depth individual interviews that covered demographic information, socialization, sexual scripts/partnering, safe sex and condom use/nonuse, drug use/sales and parenthood. These baseline interviews consisted of 127 questions and took two or more meetings to complete. They were held as often as possible in participants' homes in order to gain a sense of their environments. Ethnographers also took extensive field notes of participants' surroundings and interviews. A total of 98 women were interviewed, data from in-depth interviews with 50 women form the basis of this paper. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and entered into FileMaker Pro, a relational database program that the research team has used successfully to manage qualitative data.

The phenomenological method was used to analyze qualitative data. This approach to research and analysis aims to describe and understand social phenomena from the perspectives of the individuals involved (Groenewald, 2004). Its emphasis on meaning rather than constructing theory or proving a specific argument (Flood, 2010) makes the phenomenological method appropriate for this paper on the meanings women gave to their

sexual relationships. After interviews were collected, the first author read through the sexual scripts/partnering sections of transcripts in order to get a “global sense of the data (Giorgi, 1997)”; no categories were developed at this stage. The first author then went through the transcripts again and segmented transcripts into meaning units, specifically the meanings women gave to sexual scripts, multiple sex partners, safe sex and condom use/nonuse. The result of this stage of analysis was “a series of meaning units still expressed in the subject’s own everyday language” (Giorgi, 1997, p. 246). These meaning units were short sections, about two or three lines in length (Shaw, Burton, Xuereb). Using these meaning units, the first author fashioned a case summary (Timm, Reed, Miller & Valenti, 2011) for each participant that noted relationship status, number of concurrent sex partners in the past two years and sexual behaviors with male partners. Using the case summaries as guides, the first author then organized respondents with concurrent sex partners into one category and then returned to transcripts and coded meaning units for motivations for multiple sex partners. From these codes, the first author developed tentative themes, in other words, “emergent patterns in the data which emphasizes convergence and divergence, commonality and nuance” (Shaw et al., 2014, p.7). These themes reflected recurrent motivations for multiple sex partners described by study participants: resources, attachment to past sex partners, main partner’s infidelity and sexual pleasure. The second author coded transcripts for motivations and the authors met to discuss where codes aligned and did not align and codes were subsequently refined.

Results

Close analysis of the 50 transcripts selected for analysis revealed two main categories of concurrent intimate relationships:

Women with a main sex partner and a secondary sex partner (n=19): these participants were having sex with a main partner (a boyfriend, husband or regular sex partner) and simultaneously had one or more sex partners outside of that relationship.

Women with two or more “casual” sex partners (n=11): these participants were only involved in non-committed sexual relationships.

The remaining participants (n=20) were mutually monogamous with current male sex partners and therefore fell into another category. Because of space limitations and the scope of this paper, we do not include this group in the following analysis but will report findings on mutually monogamous interviewees in future publications.

What follows is an in-depth description of the fluidity and variation found in the above categories and how women were instrumental in forming, maintaining and ending their sexual relationships with men. Although some previous research suggests that urban Black women might be expected to uphold traditional gender roles and experience lack of power in their sexual relationships (e.g., Bowleg, Lucas & Tschann, 2004; Ortiz-Torres, 2003; Paxton et al., 2013), we find that most study participants expressed sexual agency; they exhibited control over the changes in their relationship statuses and displayed sexual assertiveness

with their partners. Note that some women may fall into more than one motivational category.

Extra Relational Sex

Thirty-eight percent (n=19) of participants had a main sex partner and one or more secondary sex partners. These relationships were deemed extra relational because primary male partners were told by participants that the relationship was monogamous or they assumed monogamy. Women's motivations for engaging in extra relational sex and with whom they did so were influenced by the social factors that informed their lives, including needs and desires. These needs included material resources while desires reflected sexual fulfillment.

Relationships with main sex partners ranged in duration from about one year to over ten. Main partners were boyfriends (in some cases live-in), husbands or something in between. For example, Madness, age 19, said that at the beginning of her relationship with Sean Paul, "He used to say, 'you my girl.' I never said you was my man, but he said I was his girl, so I left it at that." She accepted the role as girlfriend but she did not necessarily claim Sean Paul as her boyfriend. She has two secondary sex partners: a past boyfriend and her "sugar daddy." Madness did not use condoms with Sean Paul and her ex but she did use them with her sugar daddy. In the case of 18-year-old Bossy, her main sex partner was not her boyfriend. She considered Big Boy her boyfriend, or main partner, despite the fact that she had not had sex with him yet. She told us, "One thing about me is, I do make them wait." Her regular sex partner was an ex-boyfriend, Son, and she also had a brief sexual relationship with another man. Bossy used condoms with all of her sex partners. Relationships with secondary sex partners were more casual because there was little or no expectation of commitment, at least on the part of the women. Luscious (28), for example, made it clear to her other partners (one of whom was a previous main sex partner) that she had a steady mate: "My ex-boyfriend and the other guy, they all know that I have a main boyfriend. So I don't keep that a secret, I tell them." She used condoms with her secondary sex partners but not with her main sex partner.

Individual-level motivations for extra relational sex fell into four dominant themes: sexual pleasure, partner infidelity, sex exchange and past main partners. Women expressed varying incentives and desires within each broad theme. In addition, these categories were not mutually exclusive; they sometimes overlapped.

Sexual pleasure and variety—Six participants who had main sex partners indicated that they had one or more secondary sex partners for sexual pleasure and variety. Their ages ranged from 19 to 50 years old. For example, Velvet (42) had been living with her boyfriend for six months and was also having sex with another man. She told us, "I ... always want something that I don't have ... I want a difference, a change sometimes." She liked the newness and excitement that came with having multiple partners. Velvet used condoms with her extra relational partner but not with her steady boyfriend. Both she and her main sex partner had been tested for HIV, had received negative results and they subsequently did not feel the need to use condoms. Pinky (19) had two secondary sex partners because her main

partner wasn't fulfilling her sexually. She and her partner had not had sex since she had given birth to their four-month old son. "He doesn't satisfy me anymore," she told us, "so I have to find somebody else to satisfy me." She used condoms with her secondary sex partners. Mia (31) admitted being less attracted to her primary mate, with whom she lived for 12 years. This was largely due to a shift in his expression of masculinity over the years. According to Mia, he had gone from "thuggish" to religious and had also become more involved as a parent. This turned her off: "Sometimes he's like Mr. Mom and it upsets me sometimes, like just stop, like get your apron off, I'm the female." Mia espoused traditional gender roles in the household and at the same time crossed conventional expectations of monogamy. She used condoms with her secondary sex partners but not with her main partner, she stopped using condoms with him a few years into the relationship.

Determined (50) was married and had one secondary sex partner. Although she couldn't say for sure if her husband of 20 years was being unfaithful, she suspected enough to use condoms with him. He was younger and, as Determined put it, he "attracts women." She did not use condoms with her secondary partner because, "He's too old. What is he gonna do? He ain't going nowhere!" He was 70 years old and was not having sex with other women. Determined was having an extramarital affair because her husband was "a little lackadaisical, getting comfortable ... but I still have wants and needs."

Madness (19) was living with her main sex partner and expressed a desire for sexual variety as a reason for having sex outside her relationship: "One is thicker and one is longer." Although not her primary motivation, she also suspected her primary mate of cheating: "He starting to do his business I think ... He told his friend he was gonna do a taxi run ... But he told me that he was going to do some business with somebody else. So it was two different stories given." She planned on confronting him about it and breaking up with him if he was being unfaithful. She and her partner had failed to use a condom once and did not use again. Luscious (28) expressed similar suspicions about her main partner but, "because I am doing it myself, it just doesn't bother me as much." She had two secondary sex partners because she was dissatisfied with how often she and her mate had sex, but she considered him the better sexual partner. She reported that did not use condoms with her main partner because sex for her was more pleasurable without condoms.

For Madness, Luscious and Determined, sexual fulfillment overrode concerns about their partners' unfaithfulness and provided justification to seek out and manage different extra relational sex partners. Condom use within this category was mixed: half of the women in this group did not use condoms with their main partners but did so with secondary sex partners; one (Pinky) reported condom use with her outside partners and no sex with her main partner in the last four months; another used condoms with only one secondary sex partner and not with her other one and her main sex partner; finally, one participant reported using condoms with her mate but not with her secondary sex partner.

Main sex partner had cheated—Five women explained that they had outside sex partners because their main sex partners had either cheated or were strongly suspected of cheating. Similar to Nunn et al.'s (2012) sample of heterosexual Black women in Philadelphia, we find that lack of trust was one factor contributing to concurrent

partnerships. For example, Cora (28) had one secondary sex partner in addition to her main partner, with whom she had been living for three years. Hurt by her boyfriend's unfaithfulness she stated that, "Payback is a bitch; so that's when I got my friend, once I found out that's what happened." She did not use condoms with her mate but did so with her other partners. She stopped using condoms with her main partner after they both received negative HIV test results earlier in their relationship.

Chanel (27) also had two secondary sex partners because, "I don't trust him. I am not in a relationship where I am going to trust right now." She strongly suspected her main sex partner of being involved with his "baby mama." Like Cora, she used condoms with her extra relational sex partners but not with her primary mate. Chanel explained that she did not use condoms with him because he had never infected her with a sexually transmitted infection.

Diamond (28) discovered that her main partner was cheating a year after they began dating: "I didn't introduce having multiple partners into the relationship, my partner did, and once it was introduced, I was like all right, fine. I am going to do it, too." At the time of the interview she had one secondary sex partner. She used condoms with him but not with her main partner because "we have been together for (a long), we have a kid, I am comfortable." Juicy (22) had sex with men outside her relationship as a way to guard her feelings. For example, she had sex with her main sex partner's friend for revenge: "I just call it protecting myself. Like yeah, you gonna fuck other females but I'm gonna find out, but you're never gonna find out what I'm doing ... I was paying him back." She did not use condoms with her primary mate (who was incarcerated) but did so with all of her secondary sex partners.

Some women may take on extra relational partners in order to retaliate against unfaithful partners, but these cases were more than "revenge sex." Cora, Diamond, and others who fell into this group had secondary sex partners in order to create some sort of equilibrium in their main relationships, to relieve themselves of some of the pain caused by their mate's cheating and to assert their sexual independence. Interestingly, the majority of women in this category did not use condoms with their main sex partners in spite of proven or suspected infidelity. Only one woman reported using condoms with both her main partner and secondary sex partner.

Secondary sex partners as financial support—Money and other resources were cited as another reason for having secondary sex partners. Five women fell under this category. Three participants were crack users and outside partners were a source of income in order to pay for drugs. The attachment to their main sex partners was emotional rather than material. Face, (48) for example, felt that if her steady mate had more money, she would be monogamous. She liked the idea of being faithful but, "drugs affect it ... I know my man, he can't always have what I want when I want it, therefore I go out and get it." She differentiated between sex with her main partner and sex with outside partners: "I don't make love to these people, I make love to my man." Face and her main partner were both HIV positive and used condoms with each other. Condom use was less consistent with her secondary sex partners, who were aware of her HIV status: "Sometimes they don't have them, so it's not my fault. I already told them." Nana (50) spoke highly of the idea of being

faithful: “That has always really been my dream, my fantasy, my knight in shining armor.” She had extra relational sex partners as a way to purchase drugs: “When I’m getting high, I am looking for money. I am looking for a man that is going to give me money, give it to me quick and give it to me easy.” Nana’s mate did not know about these men. She sometimes used condoms with her outside sex partners and did not use them with her main partner. She explained that both she and her partner did not want to use condoms.

Shrelle’s (47) main sex partner, on the other hand, did know about her other sex partners. She called her primary companion her “other half” and claimed that being faithful “would be me, if I wasn’t using.” Like Face and Nana, she had secondary sex partners in order to support her drug consumption. She explained that she had more than one sex partner “because I’m using drugs, and I wanna get high at the time. It’s not every day, but when I start, I want some more.” She always used condoms with her sex partners but did not use them with her primary mate because of the affection she felt for him.

Juicy also exchanged sex for money with other men, but this income was used for other things besides drugs. She had multiple sex partners “because more than one person does something for me ... financially they’re there, all of them.” Her four extra relational sex partners took care of different expenses:

My number one he’s taking care my expenses as far as clothes, hair, nails, things like that. Number two, he don’t know what his money is going to but he just gives it to me. Number three, he takes care of anything that has to do with school, home, bills, things like that. Number four, that just like, pocket expenses money. He don’t give up much. I use him for MetroCards, weed, cigarettes, whatever.

Juicy strategically allocated the income received from her sex partners, indicative of “sex linked to subsistence and sex linked to consumption” (Hunter, 2002). She combined both in her sexual relationships; some partners were utilized for daily living expenses and others to meet the costs of leisure items. She told us that she was “ride or die” with her main partner and was waiting for him to be released from prison, indicating her devotion to him. Her other sex partners, on the other hand, fulfilled unmet material needs and desires. She used condoms in addition to birth control with her current sex partners.

Three out of the five women in this category did not use condoms with their main sex partners but did so with their secondary sex partners. Two women reported using condoms only sometimes with their secondary sex partners; one of these women used condoms with her main sex partner while the other did not.

Lingering attachments to former partners—Four respondents, Bossy (18), Bronx-Brownie (30), Sabrina (49) and Lolo (50) had extra relational sex partners who were ex-boyfriends and they were finding it difficult to let them go. These relationships had ended due to the male partner’s cheating, incarceration or marriage. Bossy’s shared history with her secondary sex partner included him being her first sexual experience: “That’s the main person I feel comfortable with ... with him, I got a soft spot.” She used condoms with all of her sex partners. Bronx-Brownie’s extra relational partner (Bear) was the father of her oldest child. “He was like my first love,” she told us. “Even though I am in a relationship with

Dylan (her current mate) and I love Dylan, I still have a weird certain kind of love for Bear.” She sometimes used condoms with Bear but did not use them with Dylan because she believed he was not having extra relational sex and stated that she trusted him. Lolo’s secondary sex partner, Number Three, had helped her through a difficult period: “He helped me stay clean for a long time. He took me places, he took me on a trip to get away from the drugs.” She used condoms with Number Three but did not use them with her primary mate because she did not think he was having sex outside their relationship.

Dynamics from past relationships affected those with current main sex partners. Writing about young adults, Halpern-Meekin, Manning, Giordano and Longmore (2012) call breaking up with and then having sex with an ex-partner “relationship churning” and assert that it “is a common part of romantic relationship experiences” (p. 180) in this life stage. Referring to all age groups, Dailey, Rossetto, Pfister and Surra (2009) suggest that “not all relationships can be defined as either together or apart; some are continually redefined” (p. 463). This seems to be the case with some women in our study. Respondents in this category never really ended their emotional and physical relationships with their ex-partners, so they did not make a full commitment to monogamy with their current partners. These behaviors may come with risks such as emotional distress and low rates of condom use, given that women may trust their ex-partners. However, two of the four women in our subsample did use condoms with their ex-boyfriends. They and one other woman in this group did not use condoms with their main sex partners. One participant in this category had a boyfriend with whom she was not yet having sex and used condoms with her other sex partners.

No main sex partner

Twenty-two percent of participants (n=11) had one or more sex partners but no main sex partner. Their ages ranged from 18 to 50. Women in this category were not in committed relationships with their partners but they were not necessarily casual, either. For example, Sandra (50) had two sex partners and had been seeing one of them for about 10 years and the other for one:

When I met Mr. DA, Boy Toy never left. Like Boy Toy ... be there ... we'll stop talking for a year or two, and then I don't know how we get back connected. And Mr. DA, I met him last year. I never thought we wasn't even gonna last. But he's still around ... when I can't sexually get one, then I'll go to the other. And like Mr. DA, he'll help you out. Boy Toy don't help you out, he just wanna screw you.

Sandra did not want to be exclusive with either man but she had also developed attachments to both of them. She used condoms with Boy Toy only for anal sex and used condoms all the time with Mr. DA.

Women in this category reported money or sexual pleasure as motivating factors for having uncommitted multiple sex partners. For example, Sandy (46) and Lolita (40) had paying sex partners and no other partners outside their sex work. Both used condoms with all of their sex partners. Angela (50) also had sex partners mainly for money: “It's just a money thing ... most of the time when I do it with them it really be a money thing.” She had been having sex with two men for two to three years and used condoms with them. The older women in this category claimed that being faithful was “boring” and not “fulfilling enough.” She

reported using condoms depending on how she felt at the moment of initiating sex. Several of the younger women spoke about sexual freedom and having multiple sex partners until they entered a committed relationship. For instance, Alectra (29) explained that she had multiple sex partners because “I’m single. Until I find someone that can really hold me down, and I really want to be with, then that’ll be that.” She did not use condoms with one of her sex partners “Because if a condom bust when we’re having sex, so fuck it, we’re going to keep fucking.” Alectra regularly used condoms with her other sex partners. Other women said they had multiple sex partners because of the variety. “They do different things,” Paradise (27) told us when asked why she has more than one sex partner. In this way they were similar to some of the women with main sex partners who had outside sex partners (described earlier). However, rather than reacting to men’s (main sex partner’s) sexual behavior, these women assembled their strategies and rationales in order to maximize sexual pleasure, thus asserting control over their sexuality.

Paradise and Sexy (23) emphasized the role of friendship in their sexual partnerships. For instance, Paradise explained how she knew that one of her sex partners was having sex with other women, “‘Cause we talk. Like that’s my friend ... We talk about everything.” She sometimes used condoms with this partner because “I don’t know, it just feels good (when we don’t use condoms)” and used them all the time with her other sex partner. Sexy limited her sex partners to men with whom she was very familiar: “I generally only have sex with people I’m friends with.” She used condoms with her two sex partners. These cases demonstrate that sex outside a monogamous long-term relationship is not necessarily casual as the term is conventionally understood, and it involves the use of concurrent motives and approaches. These may also be used as a safe-sex strategy, because the women trust the men to either use condoms or to be honest with them about having other partners.

Cherri (25) and Tamara (28) reported having one recent sex partner at the time of their interviews, but neither was in a relationship. They had each embraced the identity of a “player”, if only temporarily, after the end of the long term relationships. For example, Cherri said, “I say my motto is now I do the same thing that niggers do to bitches, fuck them.” Tamara expressed a similar perspective: “I went back to being a player ‘cause it felt like me being a lady didn’t pay. But now I feel like a lady again.” Cherri and Tamara altered their sexual tactics according to relationship status. They took on representations of themselves that made them feel empowered after having been in troubled relationships.

Most of the women who had no main sex partners but one or more sex partners either used condoms regularly or practiced mixed use. Seven participants in this group stated that they used condoms with their most recent sex partners. Three women reported mixed condom use and only one participant said that she did not use condoms.

Discussion

Thus far, there is only a small body of literature on Black women with multiple sex partners who are not sex workers, even though they are at heightened risk for HIV. Findings of this study contribute to the literature on Black female concurrency by addressing women’s reasons for entering various types of relationships and how they understand them. In our

analysis of relationship patterns in a sample of low-income drug using Black women in New York City with multiple sex partners, participants fell into two broad categories: those who had main sex partners but also had sex with other men and women with no main sex partner. Interviewees with secondary sex partners went outside their primary relationships for sexual pleasure and variety, as retaliation for a main partner's infidelity, as an income generating strategy or because they still had attachments to past sex partners. Those with no main sex partner reported sexual pleasure or money as motivations for having concurrent sex partners.

Results from this study suggest that the dislocation between oppression and agency has the possibility to become a unique site for interventions. Many participants saw themselves as sexual beings with the same rights and privileges as men. They were aware of their gendered constraints and felt empowered by their sexuality to resist victimization. However, they did not use their power consistently, as when they did not use condoms with men whom they knew had other partners. The most common pattern with regard to condom behavior was decreased use with main sex partners, regardless of relationship status. This is consistent with previous research finding low rates of condom usage within primary relationships (Corbett, Dickson-Gomez, & Weeks, 2009). Reasons for not using condoms with main sex partners included trust stemming from either knowing her partner for a long time or never receiving an STI from him. Other reasons were because: both partners had been tested for HIV/STIs; sexual intercourse felt better without condoms; or they already had children together. Previous research has demonstrated that trust strongly affects condom use and nonuse (Hock-Long, Henry-Moss, Carter, Hatfield-Timajchy & Erickson, 2013). A Black feminist theoretical perspective is useful here because it can help us comprehend how the combination of individual agency and large-scale structures of racism and sexism inform decisions on condom use/nonuse. More research is needed on how structural inequalities influence decisions to use condoms. In addition, condoms are typically used mainly during vaginal intercourse and less often for oral sex. An important subgroup described mixed condom use with secondary sex partners, casual partners and ex-partners. This area deserves further study, especially how condom negotiations intersect with the meanings women attach to sexual pleasure and agency. Understanding the motivations behind the different kinds of relationships women build for themselves and how they relate to safe sex practices will help to inform more targeted risk interventions.

As previously demonstrated, the women in this study experienced the effects of racism, sexism and limited incomes. Examining their relationships through a Black feminist lens makes it clear that within this intersection of multiple oppressions, however, they crafted their own sexual independence. Their individualized pursuits for sexual pleasure, accumulation of money, retaliation for a partner's cheating and more counteracted cultural symbols such as the Jezebel, Freak, Gold Digger, Baby Mama and Bad Bitch. These, and other socially constructed representations of Black women, serve to limit the full extent of Black women's sexuality (Hammonds, 1997) and participants actively resisted them by attempting to take control of their sexual choices and relationships. Women in this study exhibited high levels of sexual autonomy despite economic obstacles and negative racialized and gendered cultural imagery; they were empowered to craft their own images and self-definitions. This analysis of participants' experiences of oppression and agency becomes possible through the application of a Black feminist theoretical framework because it

highlights the structural limitations faced by Black women while simultaneously acknowledging their capacity for self-determination and creating their own sexual lives. Black feminist theory is therefore a valuable tool in public health research with Black women and its utilization in future sexual health studies should be explored.

This research contributes to a multifaceted analysis of Black female sexuality by recording experiences of sexual autonomy among Black women. Fleetwood (2012) has argued that Black feminist theory “continues to reproduce models of black women’s sexual exploitation and marginalization (p. 428).” In other words, only certain aspects of Black female sexuality have been foregrounded in Black feminist scholarship while other facets of sexuality, such as pleasure and autonomy, have been largely overlooked. This work therefore expands the theoretical lens of Black feminist thought by including these vital elements of sexuality. Furthermore, when Black female sexual agency has been explored in academia, it has largely been done so by scholars of popular culture (Fleetwood, 2012; Lee, 2010; Lindsey, 2013; Banjo, 2014). Public health research has lagged behind in this area and we lack information on how sexual agency and pleasure influences the sexual health of Black women.

Concepts such as infidelity and monogamy need to be re-examined and broadened in order to capture the vast array of women’s sexual experiences. Too often in the literature, they are treated as fixed and bounded categories. Paxton et al. (2013) have suggested that “the meaning of a relationship needs to be explored within the sociocultural context of African American women” (p. 10), recognizing that motivations for forming relationships may be shaped by a combination of economic and emotional needs. Respondents in our study attached different meanings to monogamy and practiced it in various forms according to a wide range of contexts, including relationship history and perceptions of partner fidelity. Similarly, participants experienced and understood infidelity in different ways. Some women saw it as a response to betrayal by male partners and others viewed it as a means to pursue pleasure in sexual relationships. Monogamy and infidelity are therefore dynamic rather than static concepts, ones that women deliberately constructed and reconstructed.

Our findings contribute to a small but burgeoning literature calling for a deeper analysis of “casual” sex partners (Wentland & Reissing, 2011; Garcia et al., 2015). These relationships fit into a wide range of practices, from one-night stands to bonds that are more long-lasting and emotionally layered. Special attention needs to be paid to the meanings Black women give to their relationships, including those that are and are not monogamous. This is important for creating targeted interventions for at-risk populations. Women also experienced relationship churning or cycling, a behavior pattern that to date has mainly been examined among young adults, not older or low-income Black women (Halpern-Meekin et al., 2012; Vennun, 2013). Addressing this gap in the literature is important for creating culturally specific HIV/STI counseling.

The small size of our sample and the qualitative nature of the data limit the generalizability of our findings to low-income Black women. Further research is needed to confirm and expand on the relationship patterns described in this paper. These limitations are mitigated by the detail and depth in participant interviews, a consideration for determining sample

sizes (Morse, 2000). With few exceptions, drugs were not a salient feature in the women's relationships and most participants did not report that consumption of drugs impacted their condom use. This was an unexpected finding given that previous studies have reported on the link between drug use and HIV/STI risk (Worth, 1989; Leigh & Stall, 1993; Wingood & DiClemente, 1998). Further research is needed on the effects of substance use on the sexual relationships and practices of Black women who consume drugs.

An important finding is that, unlike other studies that demonstrate how Black women may lack power in the sexual aspects of their heterosexual relationships (Jones & Oliver, 2007; Paxton et al., 2013), this study shows that they are in fact, often in control. This pushes us to rethink the relationship between risk and gender. The victimization paradigm does not apply to the majority of study participants as they were assertive and actively recruited secondary sex partners. This point has been made in international studies (Hoefinger, 2011; Hunter, 2002; Leclerc-Madlala, 2003) where the issue of women's power and agency in transactional relationships has been shown to be more multifaceted than previously thought. Our research contributes to a similar questioning of the interaction between sexual risk and autonomy among low-income Black women in the United States. There is a need for interventions that capitalize on women's perceptions of empowerment to increase condom use and reduce their potential exposure to STD/STI risks. Risk reduction programs should also include sexual satisfaction and enjoyment in their health curriculums because pleasure, often denied to Black women through stereotypical representations and missing in the literature, was a strong impetus for having multiple sex partners. For instance, the Sexual Health Model incorporates both positive sexuality and a culturally specific approach to HIV prevention. When running workshops with Black women, it has emphasized the role of slavery in shaping Black female sexuality (Robinson, Bockting, Rosser, Miner & Coleman, 2002). In addition, Francis (2014) recorded a culturally relevant and sex positive sexual health peer education program for Black female college students. More research is needed on the prevalence of these programs outside university campuses and in low-income communities. Finally, participants in this study were not only reacting to their male partners or life conditions, they were also proactively creating sexual relationships in strategic ways that they saw as beneficial to themselves. The strategies they employed to realize their sexual autonomy within multiple varied relationships may provide clues as to how sexual agency and safe sex practices can be incorporated into interventions targeting women at risk.

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