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African American Girls' Ideal Dating Relationship Now and In the Future

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Abstract

Adolescence is a particularly important and challenging time for developing long lasting romantic relationship patterns. However, limited empirical research has explored teen perceptions of ideal partner characteristics during adolescence or their significance to the quality of current and future relationships. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 33 African American high school girls to shed light on the qualities desired in their dating relationships and relational factors that influence teen dating behaviors. Guided by the Social Ecological Framework, interviews were transcribed verbatim and entered into ATLAS.ti, for coding and analysis. Girls discussed the important influence of parents in choosing a partner and provided positive depictions of friendship and marriage with a suitable partner. More research is needed to understand how and why adolescents desire particular characteristics, how socialization shapes teen perceptions and how these preferences may be related to current and future adolescent dating choices, including violence perpetration and victimization.

Keywords

Dating Relationships; Adolescent; African American

African American girls, compared to girls of other race/ethnicities, consistently report higher rates of physically violent dating relationships (Banyard, Cross, & Modecki, 2006; Malik, Sorenson, & Aneshensel, 1997; Watson, Cascardi, Avery-Leaf, & O'Leary, 2001).

According to the 2011 National Youth Risk and Behavior Surveillance (YRBS) survey of U.S. students in grades 9 – 12, the prevalence of dating violence is among the highest for African American females and males (12%) when compared to Hispanic (11%) and White (8%) peers (CDC, 2012a). Benson et al. (2004) attribute these elevated rates of violence for African Americans to their historically lower socioeconomic status, which causes them to live in disadvantaged community contexts. These disadvantaged communities breed higher

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rates of violence, including domestic violence. For example, in one of the few qualitative studies examining dating experiences of African American adolescents, Johnson and colleagues (2005) found that the African American youth often observed gender-based violence in their families and struggled to understand the boundaries of violence in their own dating relationships. Furthermore, Raiford et al. (2007) found that African American girls who reported experiencing dating violence were twice as likely as their non-victimized peers to report less understanding of healthy relationships. Given that African American girls, in particular, may be at increased risk for experiencing unhealthy dating relationships during adolescence and in adulthood, more research is needed to understand why this is so and how their relationship preferences and dynamics may heighten vulnerability (Black et al., 2011; Howard, Wang, & Yan, 2007; Raiford, Wingood, & Diclemente, 2007). Given these elevated rates of dating violence, the current study sought to understand how African American adolescent girls perceive healthy romantic relationships and their hopes for future relationships in order to inform efforts to prevent dating violence.

Adolescent Dating and Romantic Relationships

Adolescence, i.e., ages 14 – 18 years, is a particularly important and challenging time for developing long lasting relationship patterns (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009; Furman & Shaffer, 2003; Karney, Beckett, Collins, & Shaw, 2007). During this time, adolescents are developing their identity and learning to balance their need for autonomy with their desire to cultivate relationships with peers, family and dating partners (Collins et al., 2009; Furman & Shaffer, 2003). Research suggests that adolescent romantic relationships may play a distinctive role in shaping beliefs about autonomy, identity, and intimacy (Furman & Shaffer, 2003; Sorensen, 2007). Romantic relationships may facilitate an adolescents' development by prompting them to begin to think about what they are looking for in a partner and how this may relate to their personality traits, interests, and evaluation of self. It is also thought that through romantic relationships adolescents discover what is attractive and arousing (Knoester, Haynie, & Stephens, 2006). Indeed, empirical research shows that the quality of adolescent dating relationships affects their self-esteem and sexuality, and shapes their values regarding romance (Barber & Eccles, 2003). In addition, dating relationships may serve to strengthen adolescents' interpersonal skillfulness by facilitating the development of effective communication and negotiation skills, along with empathy (Sorensen, 2007). Conversely, romantic relationships may also damage adolescent girls' identity formation if girls do not feel attractive to their partners or if they become involved in an unhealthy relationship (Collins, 2003; Furman & Shaffer, 2003; Kroger, 2007). While some research shows an association between adolescent relationship "break ups" and depressive symptoms, "break ups" are also an opportunity for developing emotional resiliency and coping skills that will be needed later in life (Barber & Eccles, 2003; Monroe, Rohde, Seeley, & Lewinsohn, 1999).

Romantic Partner Characteristics

While much literature has been devoted to *sexual* partner selection among adolescents (Andrinopoulos, Kerrigan, & Ellen, 2006), modest empirical research has explored romantic or dating partner characteristics during adolescence and its significance to the quality of the

relationship (Collins, 2003; Collins et al., 2009; Karney et al., 2007). Adolescent females tend to date males slightly older than they are themselves but with similar race, ethnicity, and other socio-demographic characteristics (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003; Gowen, Feldman, Diaz, & Yisrael, 2004). Some research suggests that adolescent partners are similar on certain social characteristics, such as popularity (Simon, Aikins, & Prinstein, 2008). Simon et.al (2008) found that adolescents selected partners who shared comparable social standing and physical attractiveness, but also had similar depressive symptoms. Adolescents desired partners who were ranked similarly by their peers as being “most popular,” “good looking,” and possessing similar affective, cognitive, motivational, and somatic symptoms of depression (Simon et al., 2008). Insight into what adolescents look for in a dating partner could help researchers begin to understand the developmental process by which adolescents become involved in a healthy adolescent dating relationship.

Adolescents’ idealized partner preferences may also be associated with their psychosocial functioning and trajectories of romantic development (Sassler, 2010; Simon et al., 2008). Regan and Joshi (2003) found that when asked about their “ideal” partner, adolescents selected different attributes for a romantic partner compared to a sexual partner. In considering an ideal long-term, romantic partner, adolescents desired a variety of cognitive qualities, such as humor, intellect, and intelligence (Regan & Joshi, 2003). In contrast, when asked about the desired traits of a sexual partner, adolescents were more likely to choose external characteristics (e.g., attractiveness, sexy appearance) (Regan & Joshi, 2003).

Connection to future relationships

Adolescent beliefs about the qualities of their future romantic partners may be equally as important as what they value in current a dating partner. Little research has been devoted to understanding how adolescent current dating relationship qualities differ from their goals for future adult relationships. A longitudinal study with German youth showed that the quality of adolescent romantic relationships was positively predictive of commitment in other relationships in adulthood (Seiffge-Krenke, Overbeek, & Vermulst, 2010). McCabe and Barnett (2000) suggest that, in addition to career planning, it may also be important to help adolescents plan for future romantic relationships. Specific goals for future relationships could have a positive effect on adolescents’ understanding of healthy relationships and their ability to navigate current dating challenges (e.g. negotiating sexual relations and contraception). Using qualitative methods, McCabe and Barnett (2000) found that only 1% of their sample of at-risk African American sixth-grade students were able to provide a detailed description of their goals for future romantic relationships.

Theoretical Framework

The Social Ecological Framework can be used to understand influences on girls’ perceptions of the ideal relationship now and in the future. While this framework proposes four levels of influence on one’s dating behaviors (CDC, 2012b), the current study focuses on two levels of central importance to the lives of adolescents- individual and relational influences. At the relational level, we sought to understand how family and parents influenced girls’ perceptions of their ideal relationship. Parents may allow girls to date partners, but specify

the qualities they value (e.g. an academically serious and strong student) and the behaviors that are acceptable. In addition, girls who observe respect and trust among parents in the home may be more likely to see respect and trust as a characteristic of a healthy dating relationship. Furthermore, the dating experiences and behaviors of adolescent friends may also influence their perceptions of the ideal relationship. Connolly and colleagues (2000) showed that peer networks create a context where romantic relationships form and develop naturally. In fact, qualitative features of adolescent friendships were predictive of qualitative features of subsequent romantic relationships (Connolly, Furman, & Konarski, 2000). It is within the individual and relational levels of the SEF that the current study explored girls' perceptions of the ideal dating relationship now and in the future.

The Current Study

Though often studies focus on high-risk African American adolescents from low income communities (Sullivan, Childs, & O'Connell, 2010), the current study included a sample of African American girls from lower-middle to high income families attending high school. While individual socio-economic status (SES) was not collected from participants, demographic information about participant's high schools is provided to highlight the distinctiveness of this sample. Furthermore, few studies have attempted to use qualitative methods to investigate adolescent relationships (Akers, Yonas, Burke, & Chang, 2010; Johnson et al., 2005; Sullivan et al., 2010). Qualitative methods allow for the collection of rich, descriptive data to better understand some phenomena. Using these methods to explore African American adolescent dating relationships facilitates understanding the complex and nuanced dynamics associated with this important developmental period. Qualitative methods are able to "give voice" to adolescents views and opinions in rich and expressive ways that cannot be obtained using quantitative methods (Becker, 1996). Based on the individual and relational levels of the Social Ecological Framework, the current study aimed to provide an in-depth description of African American girls' perceptions of the ideal dating relationship now and in the future. Using girls' narratives as content, analysis was conducted to shed light on the qualities desired in their dating relationships and relational factors that influence teen dating behaviors. The specific Research Questions were:

1. What are adolescent girls' perceptions of the ideal dating relationship right now?
2. What are adolescent girls' perceptions of the ideal dating relationship in the future?
3. Do perceptions of an ideal dating relationship differ when adolescent girls' describe current versus future relationships? Why and how?

METHOD

Participants, Eligibility, and Recruitment

These data were obtained as part of broader research agenda examining adolescent girls' perceptions of healthy and unhealthy relationships and the role of socialization in shaping these ideas. Participants constituted a convenience sample recruited across 5 public and private high schools in a large Mid-Atlantic city. Sampling, recruitment and interview

protocols received approval from the University of Maryland Institutional Review Board. Eligibility criteria included: African American female high school student between the ages of 15 and 18 years old; enrollment in a participating high school; and, agreement to have the interview audio recorded. Participants were asked to self-identify their race during the eligibility process and again in a socio-demographic survey completed immediately before the interview.

A total of 33 African American girls participated in the semi-structured interviews. The age range of participants was 15 – 18 years. About half (49%) of interviewed girls were 16 years of age ($M = 16.30$, $SD = .73$). By classification, 18 girls were juniors, 11 seniors, and 4 were sophomores. Given the age eligibility criteria, none of the interviewed girls were freshman in high school. Participant demographics are summarized in Table 1. Girls were recruited from various types of schools. Sixteen girls attended at public coeducational school, 10 attended a private Roman Catholic school for girls, and 7 attended a private independent school for girls. Though socio-economic status (SES) was not collected from individual participants, the tuition required to attend the private schools suggest the majority of the sample was lower-middle to high SES. Additional information about the schools from which girls were recruited is provided in Table 2.

Study Procedures

Participants were recruited from informational sessions at each school during school assemblies, lunch periods or special class sessions. To increase visibility of the study and encourage recruitment, schools were also given flyers to circulate to students and post in school hallways and classrooms. Upon receiving consent from their parent/guardian, semi-structured one-on-one interviews were conducted with adolescent girls in a private room at their participating school. Three members of the research team (3 women; 1 African American and 2 Caucasian) conducted all interviews. During the consent process, interviewers met to review the interview protocol and guide, and standardize the process of interviewing the girls with special attention what should occur if a student disclosed being in an abusive relationship. All interviewers had at least 2 years (range from 5 – 15 years) of experience conducting interviews and focus groups with diverse populations. All interviews lasted approximately 1 – 1.5. Prior to beginning each interview, consent forms were again reviewed with participants, including situations that would necessitate a breach in confidentiality. If, during the interview, a participant disclosed that she, or someone she knew, was in danger an IRB protocol was activated to determine the nature and degree of harm and the need for further reporting and notification. All participants were also given an incentive “gift” bag that contained a resource listing of local and national hotlines and websites specifically geared toward teen dating dynamics along with \$20 in cash.

The Interview Guide included detailed questions about adolescent dating dynamics. Specifically, girls discussed their perception of an ideal relationship and how their perceptions may change in the future. Girls were asked “*How would you describe the “perfect” dating relationship, right now?*” and “*Would you describe the “perfect” dating relationship differently if I was asking about the future? If so, why?*” Follow-up probing questions were used to elicit a full and detailed description of girls’ perceptions of the ideal

relationship. For example, if the participant responded that her ideal dating relationship included communication, a follow-up question would be “*What do you mean by communication?*” or if girls mentioned their parents allowing them to date, a follow up question would be “*How have your parents influenced your dating relationships?*”

Data Analysis

All recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and entered into Atlas.Ti, a qualitative data management program (Atlast.Ti, 6.1 ed, 2010). Data analysis focused on exploring those Social Ecological Framework individual and relational influences on girls’ perceptions of an ideal relationship. Thus, a coding dictionary was created using codes such as “time, current,” “time, future,” “ideal relationship,” and “healthy relationship characteristics” to capture text related to girls perceptions of the ideal relationship currently and in the future. One member of the research team conducted the initial coding of all transcripts. To strengthen reliability and consistency of coding across all transcripts, a second member of the parent research team extracted a random sample of data to evaluate the coding at regular intervals during the coding process.

Systematic coding of transcripts in Atlas.ti allowed for the conduct of “data reduction” (Berg, 2007). The term “data reduction” refers to the process in which raw qualitative data is simplified or reduced into meaningful codes. Through the process of coding each transcript the first step in data reduction was completed. Next, Atlas.ti was used in the “data display” process mode. That is, qualitative data was assembled by its assigned codes to help researchers understand what was being said (Berg, 2007). For example, when “time-current” and “ideal relationship,” were queried, Atlas.ti retrieved coded passages across all transcripts that were coded with *both* “time- current” *and* “ideal relationship.” All narrative passages collected across transcripts were saved as a separate word processing files, then read and reread to understand if qualities associated with an ideal dating relationship changed as girl’s described current versus future relationships. Next axial coding was completed in which subcategories and categories were formed from the coded data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Main themes were generated through an iterative process of reading and rereading the transcript files. That is, through a series of on-going discussions between members of the research team, themes were described, and subcategories were formed as appropriate. It is important to note that given the diverse school in which girls were recruited the authors did attempt to determine if there were differences in responses based on the school that students attended (public, private, religious). No such differences were found thus results were combined and themes emerged for all students in the sample. The Results section presents all emergent themes and subcategories, along with verbatim quotes to illustrate their meaning. Though not quantified, all themes were endorsed by a majority of the girls. It is also important to note that girls were not specifically asked about their sexual orientation. Results are discussed using the terms “boyfriend” or “girlfriend,” as described by each participant.

RESULTS

Ideal Dating Relationship in High School

An overarching theme was the transience of high school relationships. Girls regarded all current dating relationships as casual and temporary. Girls did not believe that their current relationships would result in adult or long-term romantic relationships. Girls discussed their plans after high school and talked about not wanting to be involved in a serious relationship in high school. *“It depends on what stage in your life you are in. People are going off to school so seniors don’t want to get involved in a deep relationship most of the time...”* This same student stated, *“we are going away to school and don’t want to get tied down to somebody and then catch feelings and then go away; you have to go through the separation of that...”* Girls did not indicate that the relationships they currently engaged in would become a permanent part of their future after high school. Relationships lasting more than 6 months were considered “*shocking*” among girls. Thus, the themes extracted from girls’ discussion of the current ideal dating relationship should be viewed within a high school context.

Somebody that’s similar to me—In accord with the individual level of the Social Ecological Framework, girls described a desire to be in a relationship with someone similar to them intellectually and socially and someone who may share their values. Girls felt that sharing things in common with the partner would make it easier for them to connect and may make the relationship last longer. For example, girls desired a partner with similar religious values, *“I’m pretty religious so it would be nice like if I’m asking for advice I could get it from a Christian perspective too.”* A preference for similar family backgrounds was also expressed: *“I would want somebody that had ... the same upbringing that I had...so they would understand [the] kind of the things that I’ve done, or the way I do things so, cause they’ve kind of done it too.”* In addition, girls looked for someone who was also “*educated,*” “*still in school,*” so that they can have substantive and meaningful conversations. Girls wanted to be able to talk to their partner about their views on issues and to be able to voice their opinions about the relationship. Girls expressed a desire to be with a partner who shared their approach to school and academics. One participant described it this way *“I mean, I have good grades; I have good attendance. I want a boy that’s like me. I want somebody with good grades. I don’t want no boy that’s barely coming to school, E’s and F’s. No, why would I want that?”* Furthermore, girls sought someone who had similar plans for their education and career. This quote summarizes these beliefs, *“You want somebody that’s motivated. You don’t want somebody that’s like high school’s the end, cause me personally, I plan on going to college after this, so I don’t want to be with somebody whose plans are high school’s the end. I want somebody who has those same kinds of goals as me.”*

Being my best friend and partner—Overwhelmingly, girls expressed a wish for their ideal partner to be their best friend. *“...just someone being my best friend, because that’s something that a girl really needs is just a best friend, honestly. Some girls say “oh I don’t need a best friend, I’m fine” but every girl needs a best friend, regardless if it’s a guy, your mom, your sister, just a best friend. And I think that’s what a lot of girls look for in guys.”* Participants discussed this quality in the context of their ideal partner being a friend on

which they could depend. In support of the relational level of the SEF, the ideal partner would be a close friend that would be there for them when they were experiencing problems or struggles. Girls wanted a friend who they could talk to, who would be in their “corner,” “*somebody who is there through everything*,” but someone they can also “*hang out with*.” Girls wanted a partner who would be a friend around whom they could be comfortable. Their best friend would allow them to be themselves and reveal their beliefs, likes and dislikes; in other words, “*don’t have all your barriers, your walls up*.” Girls also wanted a partner where they could remain best friends even after the relationship ended. The desire for a “best friend” partner is described best this way, “*I would say someone that you can feel comfortable with, telling everything to...but someone that, in the end, you could be best friends, you could end up on good terms, you can be open with them*.”

In their descriptions, participants provided specific personality characteristics that they wanted in a romantic partner that was also their “best friend.” These characteristics included respect, trust, good communication, honesty, openness, and loyalty. One girl described good communication this way: “*Just being transparent and talking about everything and just making sure you both see eye to eye on everything*.” Another participant described trust and loyalty this way about their ideal partner: “*If he goes somewhere, I know that he wouldn’t do anything to hurt me. I just have to trust him that he won’t do nothing to hurt me*.” To be respectful, an ideal partner would “*show his appreciation for you whether people are around or not, like don’t treat her differently regardless of who is around...*” Some girls felt that honesty was the most important factor to look for in an ideal partner. A participant stated, “*Honesty is what keeps a relationship strong. If you don’t have honesty in a relationship, then there is no relationship*.” Girls emphasized that cheating violated their concept of respect, trust, and honesty in an ideal relationship. Girls were uniformly against the existence of cheating in their ideal relationship. One girl said, “*First [thing that] comes to mind would be cheating. It could be like betraying their trust...*”

The desire for family approval—An interesting theme that emerged from these interviews was the importance of family in shaping girls’ ideas about ideal relationships and how to identify an ideal partner. Girls expressed a desire not only for their parents’ approval, but were also interested in observing how their partner would interact with his own family. Again, this theme supports relational level of the SEF, emphasizing the role of family in girls’ lives. Girls believed that their partner should be respectful of their parents. The relationship between a partner and his parents would expose how she could expect to be treated in their relationship. One participant reflected on her mother’s advice “*My mother always says, look at how they treat their mother and you will see how they treat you*.” Girls stated that an ideal relationship would include meeting their partner’s parents and receiving approval from them, “*like they have met their parents, they know their parents, their parents trust both of them to be together*” and “*someone who’s like, not afraid to be around my family*.”

Ideal Dating Relationship in the Future

During the interview girls were asked if they felt their perceptions of an ideal relationship would change in the future. Girls were not provided with an exact timeframe for “future,”

but were allowed to create this context on their own. All girls considered “in the future” as after finishing high school. For those who discussed a timeframe, the range of responses provided by girls included 4 years from the time of the interview (approximately age 20) to around the age of 30.

Marriage—Consistently when asked about an ideal relationship in the future, girls referenced a husband or being married. Many of the girls interviewed saw an ideal future relationship as a marriage. In discussing her ideal life 4 years from now, one girl described the desire for marriage this way, “*You would want to really find that guy that’s good for you, and settle down, and probably think about marriage.*” Another girl stated “*I hope I have a good relationship with my husband.*” In the future, girls disclosed that they would be looking for a husband or hoped that they would already be married, “*I just really hope I find that one person that I know I can’t be without he’ll hopefully want to get married.*”

In the future, girls believed they would take their dating relationships more seriously. While girls did not directly define what they meant by serious, it could be inferred that girls felt that future dating relationships would have the potential to become formalized, i.e. marriage. One participant described it this way, “*but when you get older and start to settle down ...you have to be serious because you have to look for that one that you want to marry.*” Girls discussed that in the future they would be looking for a life partner. One participant expressed she would want “*to find a guy that I can spend the rest of my life with, actually stay with him for the rest of my life.*” This is in contrast to the temporality that they attributed to their current high school dating relationships. Girls expressed that there would be similar characteristics in their current and future ideal partner, (e.g. being a friend, faithful, and trusting, but that in the future all relationships would be more serious). Finally in the future, girls felt they would be looking for someone who would make a “good husband.”

Being my best friend—Similar to their perceptions of an ideal relationship in present time, girls stated that they would be looking for a friend in their ideal future mate. One participant eloquently stated, “*And just someone to, like I said, be my best friend, that’s all I need. I don’t need you treating me like princess, nourishing me, no none of that, just be a friend. Be my friend, just be there when I need you. That’s all I ask for.*” In contrast, however, when probed about the best friend qualities that they would be looking for, girls were not as specific as they had been when discussing the ideal relationship in high school. Participants emphasized qualities like being able to compromise, trusting, and a good communicator, but left out many others like respectful and honest. Many girls discussed the need in an ideal relationship to compromise about wanting children and jobs; “*In the future, as an adult, there are more things that you have to compromise on. There are more things that come into play, as far as family finances things that will come as you mature and as you age.*” Similarly they discussed compromise in the context of arguments with their partner, “*When we have a conflict in our relationship we big enough to come to each other and solve it.*” There was also a difference in the way that girls described good communication. One participant described it this way, “*Communication in this stage [present time] is not so much, because you don’t have that many things to deal with, but in the real world, you know,*

you have bills to pay, you have the mortgage payment, teenagers don't have to worry about this kind of stuff." Girls felt that communication will become a more important part of the ideal relationship in the future when girls felt that they would have more responsibilities and adult issues to discuss with their partner.

Someone who is financially stable—One characteristic that was consistently mentioned when discussing qualities of the ideal future romantic relationship was a "husband" who was financially stable. Girls expressed different opinions about what they believed it meant to be financially stable. Some girls discussed their partner as the sole provider for the family while others described their partner as contributing to the family finances. Over and over again, girls stated that they wanted partners who could "*provide for us.*" Girls were not specific about the type of job or career that their ideal partner would have, but were very clear that the job should provide "*enough to pay their bills or whatever they need in life.*" Another participant described their ideal partner as someone who "*...can't owe a lot of people money and then you're using my money to pay them back; no you have to be financially stable, have a good house, a good job, a decent job...*" Girls also talked about their partner being independent and not needing to rely on them for anything. This quote captures these sentiments: "*I'd want them to be successful, like someone who is able to be independent, kind of. They would stand on their own two feet if I wasn't around.*"

Goal oriented—In addition to being financially stable, girls desired a future partner who was "goal-oriented." Although they did not provide specific details on what these goals should be, girls agreed that their ideal partner would "*have to be motivated to do something with their lives. They cannot sit on the couch for the rest of their life and do absolutely nothing. That is a huge problem.*" Another girl described it this way, "*If I have my life together and you don't, you have to go, ... I just want someone who has their life together, who knows what they want, what they're doing ... you just have to have your head right; you have to have a good head on your shoulders.*" As another example, one girl described a future partner in these terms: "*You gotta have potential, you gotta actually have something going on with yourself because if I have something going on with myself, I'm not gonna talk to anybody that's doing anything less. So you actually have to have something going for yourself that will actually make me actually have a reason to even talk to you.*"

DISCUSSION

These interview data illustrate the strength and eloquence of girls' voices in their articulation and understanding of ideal relationships. Girls provided thoughtful and expressive statements about their dating beliefs. When given the opportunity to discuss their hopes and desires for current and future relationships, girls provided positive depictions of friendship and marriage with a suitable partner. This portrayal is somewhat in contrast to much existing research which too often depicts African American girls as prone toward risk engagement and unhealthy behaviors (Sullivan, Childs, & O'Connell, 2010). Information gleaned from these interviews in many ways dispels the notion that all African American girls are unaware of healthy relationship characteristics (Raiford et al., 2007). Girls in this sample described their ideal relationships using terms that portray positive perceptions of adolescent current and future relationships.

Ideal Dating Relationship in High School

Similarities and differences were both evident from African American girls' narratives about an ideal dating relationship, now and in the future. Several themes emerged from their description of the ideal relationship during high school: (1) temporariness of high school relationships, (2) having a partner who shared similar education and career plans, and (3) importance of family in identifying an ideal relationship. Different themes emerged in their description of the ideal future relationship: (1) desire for marriage, (2) financial stability, and (3) goals oriented. Similarly, in both their characterization of the ideal relationship during high school and in the future, girls discussed a desire for 'best friend' qualities such as respect, trust, and honesty. It is encouraging to hear that adolescent African American girls place value on these qualities and actively seek them in their romantic relationships.

Temporality of high school romantic relationships

Girls tended to equate high school romantic relationships with casualness. Girls consistently stated that these relationships were temporary, and thus, not as important to their future relationships and goals. As teenagers, they want to "*have fun*" in high school and their romantic relationships. Yet a high percentage of girls report giving birth in their teens (39.1 per 1,000 females in 2009) (CDC, 2011), thus potentially linking them to their high school romantic relationship well into the future. Thus, it may be important for girls to consider practicing safe sex to prevent unintended pregnancies and their long-term consequences (McCabe & Barnett, 2000). Teenage birth rates are even higher among African American girls (CDC, 2011). Consequently, there is no guarantee that the casual romantic relationships with which these girls are now involved will not be a part of their future.

Concordance between personal and partner qualities

Developmentally, adolescence is a time when girls are constructing their own identity, which may be shaped by dating partners and friends that share and challenge their goals and emerging ideas of self. Previously, an examination of students' grades and those of their current romantic partners found concordance even after controlling for parents' education (Giordano, Phelps, Manning, & Longmore, 2008). Consistent with those findings, adolescents in this study expressed a desire to have a partner who was similarly educated and motivated academically. Specifically, girls repeatedly stated they wanted a partner who had clear aspirations for their life after high school, which could include full-time employment or college. More research is needed to understand the positive and negative pathways through which high school relationship partners can influence girls' academic aspirations and future planning (Halpern, Joyner, Udry, & Suchindran, 2000; Schvaneveldt, Miller, Berry, & Lee, 2001).

Family Network Influence

There was an emphasis on the influence of family in shaping girls' descriptions of the ideal relationship in high school. As noted in the SEF, girls' proximal family members had a great influence on their behavior and perceptions of experience. While in high school, girls discussed wanting their parents' approval of their relationship. Girls believed there was a link between how a boy interacted with his family and how he would treat her in the

relationship. The influence of family may seem surprising given the emphasis on media as a central agency shaping teens dating dynamics, which seems to discount and/or question the impact of family and parents on adolescents' lives (Escobar-Chaves et al., 2005; Villani, 2001). In addition, adolescence is often characterized as a developmental period during which youth begin to rely more on their peers, feel less emotionally attached to their parents and spend less time with family members (Furman & Shaffer, 2003; Kimmel & Weiner, 1995; Zimmer-Gembeck, 2002). Yet, research suggests that ethnic minority mothers, in particular, may have a dynamic relationship with their adolescent daughters in which they attempt to protect them from harm and prepare them for development in sexuality and social relationships (Biederman, Nichols, & Durham, 2010). Indeed, girls' narratives in this study highlight the importance they place on family as an sphere of major influence on their ideas of an ideal partner and desire for marriage. It is interesting to note that despite the consistent references to marriage and husbands, very few girls discussed children or stated that children would be included in their ideal future romantic relationships. It is unclear if children were too distal of a consideration for girls, or if they simply do not see children as a part of their ideal future romantic relationships.

The Role of Marriage

The emphasis on marriage in participant's descriptions a future ideal relationship provides encouraging support for marriage as an important institution in the lives of African American girls. Marriage rates among African Americans have significantly declined over last several decades. Today, fewer African Americans are married than any other racial or ethnic group (US Bureau of the Census, 2010). Yet, research shows that marriage holds positive implications for African American children, parents, and families (Green, Doherty, Fothergill, & Ensminger, 2012; Horwitz, White, & Howell-White, 1996; Koball, Moideuddin, Henderson, Goesling, & Besculides, 2010). Research suggests that being exposed to an intact family or non-divorced parents is associated with delays in smoking initiation and sexual debut (Barrington, 2010; LaVeist, Zeno, & Fesahazion, 2010). African American families experience better mental health, less depression and higher social support when engaged in a high quality marriage (Lincoln & Chae, 2010). Furthermore, married African Americans engage in fewer sexual risk behaviors which could result in sexually transmitted diseases, than single or cohabitating African Americans (Taylor, Adimora, & Schoenbach, 2010). Thus, it may be important that parents and families support this future goal for marriage among adolescents in order to positively affect the future of marriages within the African American community. It is yet to be determined, however, if setting goals for marriage and future relationships will actually result in positive future outcomes; more research is needed to understand the longitudinal effects of future relationships planning on adolescent developmental trajectories. Research does suggest that increased planning for the future, even if not related to relationships (i.e. career and educational planning) may have positive implications for engagement in risky health behaviors (Robbins & Bryan, 2004; Somers & Gizzi, 2001).

Characteristics of a Future Partner

Perhaps as a reflection of the current national economic climate, girls placed a strong emphasis on an ideal partner being financially stable and having tangible goals for their

future. Girls consistently discussed wanting a future partner to be able to provide for them financially. Many girls even took this desire further by stating that their ideal future partner would have a stable career, not “*just a job*.” This aligns with research which showed that young adults (age 18 and over) value a financially secure relationship and placed emphasis on positive economic prospects (Manning, Giordano, Longmore, & Hocevar, 2011). Similarly, a survey of adult Black men and women showed that respondents’ ideal marriage partner would earn significantly more than they do and would help them acquire a middle class income or sustain a middle-class lifestyle (King & Allen, 2009). It is not clear if among the girls in the current study this preference is born out of a desire of wanting to maintain the socio-economic status of their current families or a value that has been instilled by other socializing influences. More research is needed to better understand the value adolescents and young adults place on this quality for their ideal future partner.

Limitations

There are a number of study limitations that should be noted. Study participants constituted a convenience sample of lower-middle to high SES African American adolescent girls recruited from high schools in the Mid-Atlantic region through word of mouth, fliers, and school presentations. It may be that those students interested in participating in the study represent a select subset of students that is more comfortable talking about their beliefs about healthy dating relationships. Despite wide-ranging recruitment strategies, and the extended nature of recruitment, girls who do not regularly attend school may have not been aware of the study in order to express interest in participating. In addition, girls in the study often discussed the importance of academics and achievement in their ideal relationship. Thus, as schools participating in the study also constituted a convenience sample of public and private schools of diverse SES families, it may contain more academically minded adolescents than teens who attend schools in other areas. For example, our findings stand in contrast to the work of Johnson and colleagues (2005), who conducted focus groups with African American girls from high violence schools/settings and found that violence and abuse was sometimes seen as a normal component of relationships and a sign of commitment, which we did not find. We attribute this difference to likely SES differences in sample composition, but it should be noted that while we characterized the sample as lower-middle to high SES, this information was not directly collected. While the lower-middle to high SES of our sample is our impression based on our qualitative assessment, we did not collect this information directly from girls as stated in the methods section. Furthermore, girls’ current relationship status (i.e. dating, single) may have influenced the qualities they attributed to an ideal relationship. As relationship status was not collected by the study, it is not clear if adolescents who were currently involved in romantic relationship had differing views about ideal relationships than girls who were not currently involved in a relationship. In addition, it should be noted the wide variability in the timeframe the girls deemed as “future” may have influenced their perceptions of an ideal relationship. Desires for a partner during emerging adulthood (i.e. ages 18–21) may be drastically different than desires for an ideal partner at age 30. Finally, the study also place no restrictions on sexual orientation of participants, thus, it is unclear if the perceptions of lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender African American adolescent girls are expressed in current study findings.

Implications

Study findings provide a window into adolescent perceptions of the ideal romantic relationship now and in the future. Findings can be used to develop community based initiatives that would speak to the everyday experiences of today's adolescent girls. Initiatives like the "Yes!" project have successfully used community based participatory research to enlist the participation of youth in addressing risky behaviors like alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use within their community (Wilson, Minkler, Dasho, Wallerstein, & Martin, 2008) and thus could be extended to healthy dating relationships. For example, initiatives may want to intervene at various levels of the SEF as evidenced by this study. At the relational level, helping girls understand how seeking a current dating partner who academically excels and a "*best friend*" may have implications for their own development. In addition, involving parents in conversations regarding characteristics of dating partners is another area to explore as girls in the current study spoke about the influence of their parents and family. More research is needed to understand how and why adolescents desire particular characteristics and how these preferences may be related to current and future adolescent dating choices. The myriad of ways romantic relationships affect adolescent development have yet to be fully explored, but it is clear that these relationships warrant more attention by researchers to better understand their relationship trajectories. Study findings provide promising groundwork to build upon in support of the development of intimacy and healthy dating relationships among African American adolescent girls.

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Table 1**Participant Demographics**

Variables	Categories	(N=33)
Age	15	12.1%
	16	48.5%
	17	36.4%
	18	3.0%
Grade in School	10 th grade	12.1%
	11 th grade	54.5%
	12 th grade	33.3%
School Attended	School A	21.2%
	School B	15.2%
	School C	24.2%
	School D	15.2%
	School E	24.2%

Table 2

School Demographics

School Name (grades)	School Type	Enrollment	% African American	% Free and Reduced Lunch / Annual Tuition
School A (Pre-kindergarten-12)	Private, all female	911	14%	\$24,630
School B (9–12)	Private, Roman Catholic, all female	287	19%	\$11,550
School C (9–12)	Public coed	1,104	54%	62%
School D (9–12)	Private, Roman Catholic, all female	317	21%	\$11,375
School E (9–12)	Public coed	1,634	89%	58%