

Integrating Black feminist thought into conceptual frameworks of African American adolescent women's sexual scripting processes

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Abstract

This paper integrates Black feminist thought with Simon and Gagnon's (1986). *Sexual Scripts: Permanence and Change*. Archives of Sexual Behavior, 15, 97–120.) framework of sexual script development to illustrate ways in which sexuality socialization, messages, and meanings are internalized and are manifested through sexual scripts among African American adolescent women. The influence of the media, peers, family, and racial and gender identity factors in this process are highlighted. As blueprints about sexual norms, behavior, and experiences, the sexual scripting processes identified through this new paradigm have implications for research and programming that target human sexuality issues within this population.

Keywords: *African American, women, feminism, sexual scripts, hip hop*

Introduction

Sexual scripting has emerged as an essential framework for understanding schema used to organize ideas of appropriate sexual experiences, creating norms regarding sexual behavior that are expressed and maintained through their usage (Gagnon, 1990; Simon & Gagnon, 1984, 1987). This paper integrates Black feminist thought with Simon and Gagnon's (1984, 1986, 1987) framework of sexual script development to construct a culturally specific paradigm with which to examine sexual scripting processes of African American adolescent women's sexuality. Specifically, this sexual messaging framework illustrates how contextual and individual factors shape sexual script

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development for this population. Thus, the paradigm put forth here will have implications for the development of research and programs seeking to address this population's sexual risk taking, decision making processes, and behavioral outcomes. This is particularly important given the fact that knowledge about sexual risks does not translate into sexual behavioral change; instead, the meanings that emerge from sexual messages are important for understanding how knowledge affects behavior (Longmore, 1998). Further, across their gender cohort, African American adolescent women are at the greatest risk for HIV/AIDS transmission, gonorrhea, herpes, syphilis, multiple partners, unplanned pregnancy, non-voluntary intercourse, sexual abuse, and the earliest ages of sexual onset (Centers for Disease Control, 2000).

Sexual scripts

Sexual scripts (Simon & Gagnon, 1984, 1987) are types of schemas that are instrumental in helping individuals organize ideas of appropriate sexual experiences. They create norms regarding sexual behavior that are expressed and maintained through their usage. Research has found that they are instrumental in the creation of a belief system, developing a set of attitudes about one's sexual being, and outlining prescriptions for behaviors that not only influence individuals' evaluation of their sexual "beingness", but also impact others' perception and evaluation of an individual's sexual beingness (Simon & Gagnon, 1987). This reciprocal process of knowing takes place because people develop a sense of sexual meanings through social interactions and exposure to sexual messaging that takes place within continually changing cultural and social contexts (Longmore, 1998).

Although there is a large body of research on sexual script development and its influence on behavioral outcomes focusing on heterosexual white adolescents (e.g., Alksnis, Desmarais & Wood, 1996; Rose & Frieze, 1993; Ross & Davis, 1996) as well as gay and lesbian populations (e.g., Klinkenberg & Rose, 1994; Rose, 2000). Studies that specifically address African American females' sexual script development are virtually non-existent. As such, the subjectivity of African American women is largely ignored. This is problematic given that research has shown African American females' understandings of appropriate sexual behaviors are processed through sex role socialization and vary by racial and ethnic group (Fullilove, M. T., Fullilove, R. E., Hayes & Gross, 1993; Sterk-Elifson, 1994). Therefore, there is a need for consideration of the association between sexual behavior and sexual meanings expressed in sexual scripts. How individuals view themselves as sexual beings and how they exhibit sexual behavior—in terms of where, when, how often, with whom, and why—are manifestations of what has been learned and the meaning associated with this learning. Both learning and meaning about sexuality are transmitted through cultural contexts that, for African American adolescent women, are embedded in a unique gender and racial experience (Kimmel & Fracher, 1992, p. 473).

For example, extensive qualitative and anecdotal data in the fields of Women's Studies and African American Studies have led to the identification

of four foundational images of African American women's sexuality. The promiscuous Jezebel, asexual Mammy, breeding Welfare Mama, and emasculating Matriarch all reflected the social, political, and economic value American society placed on African American women (see Collins, 2000; Morton, 1991). The remnants of these foundational images remain influential frameworks of African American female sexuality. This is exemplified by the similar, yet more sexually explicit, sexual scripts available today identified by Stephens and Few (2005a), those being the Diva, Gold Digger, Freak, Dyke, Gangsta Bitch, Sister Savior, Earth Mother, and Baby Mama.¹ These scripts are unique in the ways that gender and racial stereotypes are integrated into understandings of African American adolescent female sexuality within the context of the current youth driven culture of hip hop. Stephens's (2004) exploratory study of sexual scripts usage revealed that African American early adolescents and young adults clearly recognized and felt that these eight sexual scripts shaped attitudes and beliefs about sexuality among their peers.

As such, it is important to identify the specific contexts that influence African American female sex socialization processes and, in turn, sexual script development. More specifically, there is a need to clearly identify and delineate the socio-historical frameworks of race and gender embedded within the sexual scripts that are unique to this population.

Theoretical frameworks

Theory grounds how researchers identify, name, interpret, and write about adolescent African American women's unique experiences. Therefore it is important to identify a theory that reflects African American females' social location and that of others with whom they interact in their world. For these reasons, Black feminist thought has been identified as an appropriate framework for exploring this phenomenon.

Whereas traditional theories offer frameworks that are flexible enough to fit realities of any group's development, Black feminism is more specific in its integration, validation, and centering of Black women's unique realities (Few, Stephens & Rouse-Arnette, 2003). It rejects the notion of universal laws of behavior, favoring idiosyncratic approaches by focusing on individual functioning, goals, and meaning within Black female realities. The historical, economic, political, and social experiences that have shaped others' and their own perspectives of who and what Black women represent are central in Black feminism. Black feminism stems from critical scientific inquiry that suggests men and women are potentially active agents in the construction of their social world and their personal lives. They analyse the meanings, social rules, values, and motives that govern action in a specific context (Comstock, 1982). Human action and interpretations are considered historical by-products of collective experience. As a field of inquiry that emerged from both feminist and critical race theories, Black feminist thought validates the experiences of Black women in the creation of knowledge.

Black feminists further assert that African American women have a shared historical reality and, thus, a shared worldview of historical resistance to their own oppression and dehumanization (Collins, 2000). The marginalization of African American women as members of a specific group characterized by their gender and race creates a shared experience. For example, for many if not most African American women, race is the most salient construct centering both their individual and group identity (Shorter-Gooden & Washington, 1996). This commonality is not viewed simply as a shared physical reality; rather, race is viewed as a sociopolitical term with cultural underpinnings that distinguishes between true biological differences and also classifies people according to sociopolitical and economic categories where membership is determined by physical characteristics (Helms, 1995). Both as a biological construct and sociohistorical reality, ideas about race have placed African American females in a complex dual relationship to both Black culture and the dominant culture that Black women have to negotiate in their daily interactions (Hooks, 1984). It is argued here that, for African American women, these broad shared set of experiences, framed within a unique racial and gender context, influence the ways in which sexual scripts shape their development as sexual beings. This in turn directly impacts their sexual risk decision-making processes. As such, it is important to examine the ways in which African American female sexuality socialization takes place at multiple locations, and how these locations' degree of influence may differ as a function of racial and gender experiences.

Simon and Gagnon's (1984, 1986, 1987) framework of sexual script development serves as the foundation for illustrating this. The authors delineated three levels of sexual script socialization: (1) cultural, (2) interpersonal, and (3) intrapsychic levels. These three levels interact simultaneously as African American females synthesize their triadic sexual socialization (via race, gender, and sexuality messages) and develop ways to understand how to integrate these macro and micro meanings. Thus, while acknowledging the existence of within-group difference, the model put forth here attempts to illustrate what is universal and what is unique in the interactions of gender, race, and sexuality.

In particular, the familial unit, peers, and the mass media have all emerged as key sources of sexuality socialization for African American women. Further, these sites of information are experienced differently by African American women due to their unique racial identity, providing differing meanings about gender and sexuality. For example, Wyatt's (1997) research found African American women feel and know that stereotypes about African American female sexuality expressed through the media, within their community, and among their families provide standards for sexual behavior (Wyatt, 1997). It is asserted here that these sites of information interact to influence sexual script negotiation as African American female adolescents "learn" to engage in sexual risk-taking through the observation of actions and degree of approval linked to sexual behaviors expressed by their family, peers, and other valued social units they interact with daily (Hazel-Ford, Tess & Sarvela, 1992; Igra & Irwin, 1997) We put "learn" in quotes because we

hold that the relationship between these forces of socialization and young African American women's experiences of sexual agency is a mediated relationship. That is, socialization provides a macro level platform from which sexual agency begins to be negotiated by young women. In the following section, the sources of influence will be examined systemically as important sites for the development of understandings about race, gender, and sexuality, that is, socialization, for African American adolescent women. Simon and Gagnon's framework is used to organize these sites of sexual messaging, while Black feminist thought centers the meanings and values given to the messages.

Cultural level

At this level, general outlines of appropriate objects of sexual desire, appropriate relationships between sexual actors, appropriate places and times for sexual activity, and what participants in the activity are assumed to be feeling are delineated (Hynie, Lydon, Cote & Wiener, 1998). Cultural level sources of information reflect the "official" or "authorized" attitudes and beliefs of the general society.

The most influential source of sexuality information for adolescents at this level is the mass media. The popular media not only reflects and perpetuates young women's expected roles in society, but also offers them a space to learn about pleasure and resistance. For instance, in hip hop songs and videos, young African American women explore the pleasure of sexual self-assertion with their African American male partners at the same time as they try out "talking back" to these same men when they "treat them wrong" in the sexual arena (Phillips, Reddick-Morgan & Stephens, 2005). Messages offered through the mass media are important tools for exploring cultural constructs, as they served to both emulate and disseminate a range of race, gender, and sexual stereotypes. Among the types of media, television is perhaps the most widely utilized forum by African American adolescents. Research has shown that television provides adolescents with guidelines for behavior and identity development (Botta, 2000). In particular, across genres, entertainment programming has emerged as the most important source of information and socialization for African American adolescents (Comstock & Scharrer, 1999; Hazel-Ford et al., 1992; Roberts, 2000). In a study by Albarran and Umphrey (1993), the top three reasons African American adolescents' cited for watching television were because it is enjoyable, it is entertaining, and it keeps them aware.

Music videos have emerged as one of the most popular genres of television programming among adolescents. Of the musical styles consumed by adolescents today, hip hop receives the most rotation on Black Entertainment Television (BET) and Music Television (MTV), both of whom devote the majority of their programming to music videos primarily viewed by adolescents. It is within these hip hop music videos that the sexual scripts for African American females most boldly emerge and are maintained (Stephens & Phillips, 2003). On a basic level, music videos are a vehicle to

promote particular artists and songs. However, it has been suggested by those within the hip hop video industry (artists, producers, directors) that these videos merely reflect the content of the music, in turn, putatively reflecting the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of those consuming them (Smart Young, 2002). Unfortunately, this means that traditional ideas about race, gender, and sexuality often continue to shape ideas about African American adolescent women's sexuality. For example, females in hip hop videos are depicted as simultaneously having great sexual desires and as quenching these sexual needs by being degraded for male pleasure (Brown, 2000; Morgan, 2002; Roberts, 1996). As hip hop feminist Tara Roberts explains, "If you are a woman in hip hop, you are either a hard bitch who will kill for her man, or you're a fly bitch who can sex up her man, or you're a fucked-up lesbian" (Roberts & Ulen, 2000). In these videos, women are not individuals; rather they are projected as characters and a mass of body parts for males' consumption. It is common in videos to have multiple women vying for one man's attention through the use of highly sexualized verbal and non-verbal cues, including clothing, eye contact, and actual conflicts with other women. Those women who are displayed as being socially desirable tend to be of other races or very light skinned African Americans (Morgan, 2002). It was through an analysis of hip hop culture that eight sexual scripts reflecting frameworks of African American female womanhood were identified and categorized. The Diva, Gold Digger, Freak, Dyke, Gangster Bitch, Sister Savior, Earth Mother, and Baby Mama sexual scripts highlight the distinctive identity processes unique to this population. Specifically, Stephens & Few (2005a) found these descriptive titles and associated behaviors are universally identifiable and understood among African American youth of both genders. Further, these scripts were found to shape beliefs about physical attractiveness and interpersonal relationships specific to African American female's experiences (Stephens & Few, 2005b). Taken together, these findings illustrate how sexual norms, within these specific gender and racial frameworks of sexual scripts, are presented via hip hop videos for viewers' consumption and use.

It is important to consider how the continuous consumption of these sexual scripts can affect how African American women come to create a sexual identity and direct their sexual behaviors. Viewers of cross-cultural television programming consistently pay more attention to those on the screen who looks like them, whether the distinguishing characteristic is race or gender (Comstock & Scharrer, 1999). Some adolescent developmental theorists have suggested that the adolescent is learning in what ways he or she is like all other people, like some others, and not like certain others through television (Brown, 2000, p. 37). Makkar and Strube (1995) found that African American adolescents are more likely to make comparisons with their cohort on television. Thus, the projected scripts provide a means to gauge how they measure up to images projected as ideal (Botta, 2000; Comstock & Scharrer, 1999). How the media projects these possibilities, either positively or negatively, has the potential to shape how an individual sees himself or herself. In addition, it potentially shapes how others view and interact with

African American adolescent women. For example, White male and female college students evaluated the personality of African American women more negatively after being exposed to hip hop music videos featuring songs of devoted love or sexual titillation (Gan, Zillman & Mitrook, 1997), demonstrating the effect of racial cues over other contextual cues.

This self-identification with the scripts, it is suggested here, is a source of influence upon the behaviors of African American women. Stephens and Few (2005a) found that early African American adolescents do recognize these sexual scripts and utilize them as conceptual frameworks to predict behaviors of their peers and potential partners. In addition, other studies' findings on media projections of female sexuality indicate that they do affect African American female adolescents' sexual decision-making. Wingood et al. (2001) found that African American adolescent females who viewed films with high levels of African American sexual content were approximately twice as likely to have multiple sex partners, more frequent sex, not use contraception during last intercourse, and have a strong desire to conceive. There was also some association between watching images with excessive sexual content and increased likelihood of having negative attitudes toward condom use and testing positive for chlamydia (Wingood et al., 2001). In a related study, it was found that African American adolescent females who had greater exposure to hip hop videos were twice as likely to have had multiple sexual partners, and 1.5 times more likely to report a sexually transmitted disease (Wingood et al., 2003).

While the cultural level scripts do open a wide window view on sexuality messages for African American women, they offer only a limited picture of sexual experiences and possible sexual meanings. Rather, the messages consumed at this level provide a framework that this population must negotiate based on their understandings of how they view themselves and those they interact with. Concrete situations, such as specific sexual encounters, draw on the cultural level messages, such as video scenarios, and exert subtle pressure on how individuals think they should act in real life situations. Based on the responses they receive to their choices in these interpersonal interactions, young women learn to re-evaluate cultural level messages as they pertain to their own personal experiences. That is, while cultural level scripts often contain messages about how individuals should act in certain situations, these messages are mediated by personal experience. Such mediation, based on the interplay between personal agency and weighty social forces, is highly dynamic and individualized, producing diverse outcomes within any population. Essentially, to frame what they choose to consume from the cultural level of sexual script influences, adolescents draw from information gathered from the interpersonal level.

Interpersonal

At the interpersonal level, individuals' understandings of the sexual self are drawn from their socialization processes and the unique experiences that

have shaped their understandings about sexuality. To understand this process among the population being examined here requires an identification of the direct influences that shape how they come to understand their position as African American women in society and the sources from which they gather information about sexuality. For African American adolescents, information about personal goals, motivations, and sources of socialization most often involves peers and familial members. For example, Aaron and Jenkins (2002) found African American female adolescents looked to their friends or close female relatives to answer questions about sexual health and intercourse.

Peers. In their research on African American adolescent women's sexual scripts, Stephens and Phillips (2003) argued that it is within an African American peer culture that African American women's sexual scripts are maintained and expressed most openly. The sexual scripts for African American adolescent women are known and understood throughout the African American youth driven culture known as hip hop (Roberts & Ulen, 2000). This culture's shared expressions on race, gender, and sexual expectations and meanings for African American females is important to examine as peers begin to have an even greater influence during puberty and adolescence (Woodarski, Smokowski & Feit, 1996). By participating in peer culture/groups, adolescents are able to satisfy their needs for acceptance and yet be different from the adults in their life (Sosnowitz, 1995; Zimmerman, Copeland, Shope & Dielman, 1996).

African American adolescents tend to have peers from the same racial group, and this impacts their understandings about racial identity, stereotyping, and scripts. In a study on race schematicity, memories for racially stereotyped portrayals, and race-based peer preferences, race schematicity was positively and significantly associated with same-race peer preference bias (Levy, 2000). It has also been found that African American young adults appear more knowledgeable and sensitive to racial stereotypes in general than their White peers (Ryan, 1995; Ryan, Park & Judd, 1996). Specifically, African American students demonstrated equivalent and superior accuracy in stereotypicality judgments of racial stereotypes concerning African Americans (i.e., in-group information) and Whites (i.e., out-group information). This indicates the centrality of racial messaging and meaning development within African American peer cultures.

Ideas about what is appropriate sexual behavior in the group are important, as adolescents' attributions regarding their friends' sexual activity are more strongly associated with their sexual behaviors than are friends' actual behaviors (Cvetkovich & Grote, 1981). This reinforces the importance of understanding the influence of peer socialization processes on gender and racial identity development as a means of understanding and unpacking African American adolescents' attitudes toward sexual scripts and risk-taking behaviors. Unfortunately, adolescents often rely on peer acceptance to define and gauge their behaviors. For example, African American adolescents who

feel least assured of their emotional connection with friends may be most likely to yield to peer pressure to feel included, which can engender troublesome behavior (McCreary, Slavin & Berry 1996). Further, even if an adolescent develops a negative attitude toward unhealthy behaviors, she or he may not possess the skills to resist strong social pressures to conform to peers who do not share that attitude (Wodarski *et al.*, 1996). This is particularly true when examining sexual health issues. For example, one study found that the rate that African American adolescent sexual activity progressed and the extent to which condoms were used were both associated with the perceived behavior of friends (Woodarski *et al.*, 1996). Thus peer beliefs and attitudes about general behaviors and health, particularly sexual health, are influential and must be considered as a central source of sexual messaging among this population.

Family. Unlike musical forms of the past, hip hop as a youth-driven African American subculture is the first that lacks cross-generational involvement. Previous African American music genres could be enjoyed by everyone in the African American community, from grandmothers to toddlers (Smitherman, 1997). Further, African American adolescents are rarely experiencing television and other media forums with a parental presence (Roberts, 2000). This disconnection between the peer culture and families is important to consider when examining the influence of sexual script messages. This is because the quality of parent-adolescent relationship has been found to be associated with the influence of peers during this phase of the lifespan. When the relationship is negative, there is an increased likelihood of the adolescent seeking the company of peers who engage in risk taking behaviors (Blanton, Gibbons, Gerrard, Conger & Smith, 1997; Patterson, Reid & Dishion, 1992; Werner, 2003). African American women who delayed sexual onset have also been found to say their parents have the greater influence in their life compared to their friends.

General familial socialization patterns greatly influence African American adolescent identity development. This is because general communication between parents and adolescents is essential for the transmission of values, attitudes, and knowledge (Feldman & Rosenthal, 2000; Miller, Kotchick, Dorsey, Forehand & Ham 1998; Nolin & Petersen, 1992). These expectation messages from African American parents, as expressed through their beliefs, values, and behavioral pattern models, can function as adaptive mechanisms, and the effectiveness of parents' strategies is multiplied when they reflect the population's unique racial experiences (Boykin & Ellison, 1995; Luster & McAdoo, 1994; McAdoo, 1991).

The family serves as the primary site for the racial socialization of children (Demo & Hughes, 1990; Plummer, 1996; Stevens, 1997; Watson & Protinsky, 1988) as well as the socialization of gender identity (Baca Zinn, 1994; McGuffey & Rich, 1999; Ribbens, 1994; Ross & Van Willigen, 1996; Wood, 1995). Parenting processes are central in the transmission of racial and gender attitudes about self that allows the adolescent to reject stereotyped

scripts (Cross, 1971; Rotheram & Phinney, 1987; Wilson & Constantine, 1999). For instance, studies have found that parents who emphasize their ethnic or racial group's culture, history, and heritage report higher self-esteem, more knowledge about their racial group, and more favorable in-group attitudes (e.g., Marshall, 1995; Stevenson, 1995). Similarly, provided with positive messages about being female, adolescent girls are more likely to have higher levels of self esteem and less likely to engage in risk taking behaviors (e.g., Baldwin & Hoffmann, 2000; Marcotte, Fortin, Potvin & Papillon, 2002).

It can be inferred from these findings that sexual script negotiation, within a gender and racial context specific to African American adolescents' experiences is also affected by parenting processes. General sexual behavior research supports this. For example, African American adolescents perceiving greater parental controls and a stable, regular parental presence in their lives had lower levels of sexual activity (Jemmott, J. B. & Jemmott, L. S. 1992). Further, the more open the communication between parents and adolescents regarding sexual risk taking behaviors, the less likely these risk behaviors are to take place (Rodgers, 1999). Hutchinson and Cooney (1998) found that these conversations took place more often with African American rather than White adolescents and their parents. However, these conversations are only effective when communicated using an open and skilled manner as this influences the extent to which the adolescents internalize the messages (Whitaker, Miller, May & Levin, 1999).

Intrapsychic

Connections between the sexual scripts and sexual behaviors are influenced by the extent to which an African American adolescent woman can identify with or imagine herself within the scripts she consumes, as well as the messages about her sexuality received from those with whom she directly interacts (Brown, 2000). The everyday consumption of cultural and interpersonal messages regarding sexual scripts has a direct impact on young African American women's sexual self-identity, behaviors, and experiences. Sexuality research has shown that the negotiation of general sexual messaging is moderated by an individual's self-identification, which takes place at the intrapsychic level (see Longmore, 1998). This negotiation of cultural and interpersonal level messages relies on the individual's understanding of their own identity's relationship to the sexual scripts and messages consumed. This is because the construction of an identity not only shapes and individual's sexual identity, but also informs their decision-making and behavioral outcomes.

Identity development has been argued to be a pivotal crisis in the transition from childhood to adulthood (Worrell, 2000). Erikson (1950, 1959, 1968) argued that figuring out "who I am" and "who others think I am" are the key identity development tasks during this phase of the lifespan. The development of healthy identities for African American adolescent women must be centered in understanding of themselves that are worthy and valued not only as a women, but also African Americans. According to Stevens

(1997), cultural dissonance is the primary dilemma that African American females must deal with at the onset of adolescence. The societal devaluation of not only her gender but also her racial minority status is at the core of these quandaries.

The work of Sterk-Elifson (1994) may be useful in understanding this phenomenon as it relates to sexuality. This scholar's research has found that African American females' understandings of appropriate sexual behaviors are processed through sex role socialization and vary by racial and ethnic group (Sterk-Elifson, 1994). Several studies have shown associations between racial identity, as well as gender identity, and general adolescent psychosocial development (e.g., Crawford & Unger, 2000; Shorter-Gooden & Washington, 1996). Few studies, however, have combined racial and gender identity simultaneously to explore this phenomenon, or specifically considered the extent to which their combined effect may buffer adolescents from sexual risk by dissuading the internalization of stereotypic racial and sexual images often associated with African American adolescent female sexuality.

The processes of being gendered and gendering identity

Gender identity refers to the degree to which an individual sees herself or himself as feminine or masculine based on society's definitions of appropriate gender roles (Burke & Cast, 1997). From birth throughout the lifespan, gender identity is being developed (Carter, 1991; Lytton & Romney, 1991; Pleck, 1992; Whiting & Edwards, 1988). Through various types of subtle and obvious gender indoctrination processes, the definition and establishment of boundaries regarding behaviors and personal identities of females are created.

However, it should be noted that since gender identity develops over time and is shaped by life experience as well as group-specific socialization processes its formation differs by racial group. Unfortunately, there is a void in the research that specifically addresses how gender identity develops in the African American community. Thus, research must draw upon findings that illustrate the differences in gendered experiences cross culturally. For example, in African American families, both sons and daughters are socialized toward independence, employment, and childcare (Hale-Benson, 1986). African American adolescent females are also more likely to see paid employment more compatible with material and familial responsibilities than their European and American counterparts (Holland & Eisenhart, 1990; King, 1988). This can be contrasted with research showing that white college age women are encouraged to marry to find happiness, while their African American cohort is expected to focus on occupational status to find success in life (Collins, 2000; Higginbotham, 1981; Higginbotham & Weber, 1992).

Differing messages about gender appropriate behaviors appear to also affect the sexual decision-making, behavioral outcomes, and experiences of African American adolescent women. For example, it is well-known and widely discussed among African American women that the pool of African American

males is much smaller than other racial groups; the ratio of young adult males to females in the African American community is 89 to 100, versus 132 to 100 for whites (Wyche, 1993). Further high rates of incarceration, gender-based disparities in education and employment opportunities, and greater willingness to marry outside the race among African American males has led many African American women to feel they must be more competitive or take greater sexual risks when it comes to dating (Nelson, 1997). Across social economic class and age cohorts, African American females are inundated with messages that there are few “quality” black males available (Day-Vines, Patton & Baytops, 2003; Mahay, Laumann & Michaels, 2001; Smith, 1996; Sterk-Elifson, 1994; Tolman, 1996). Further, messages normalizing male infidelity, engagement in short term relationships, or stressful long term relationships have become common among groups of African American adolescents and young adults (Aronson, Whitehead & Baber, 2003; Cerwonka, Isbell & Hansen, 2000; Fiebert, Nugent, Hershberger & Kasdan, 2004; Oggins, 2004).

These realities directly affect sexual decision-making processes. Bynum (2001) found that African American college women at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) were less likely to engage in sexual risk taking than their cohort in predominantly white schools because the pool of eligible mates was greater, thus lessening anxieties about the availability of suitable mates. Gender specific experiences and expectations about sexual behaviors are further complicated by the fact that African American males are encouraged more than African American women to endorse pre-marital sexual relations and find it acceptable to have sex outside of committed relationships (Fullilove et al., 1993). While this “double standard” appears in many if not most cultures, it creates a complex issue for African American women’s sexuality, due to the culturally specific politics of respectability and the accompanying culture of silence around sexuality (Basow, 1992; Collins, 2000; Kelly & Bazzini, 2001), which may influence African American women to maintain a cloak of secrecy around their sexually risky behaviors if they are deemed necessary to secure a mate. While “good girls” are distinguished from “bad girls” by their commitment to one partner rather than multiple partners (Lewis, 1995), a tacit concession to “man-sharing” among some women heightens the women’s risk. Collectively, these conflicting messages regarding appropriate behaviors around gender and sexuality indicate that adolescent African American women need distinctly different tools for negotiating their sexuality from women of other cultures.

Racial socialization and racial identity development

The negotiation of an understanding of the self is formed and reformed within the context of American and African American culture, creating a personal meaning and self-narrative known as racial identity (Stevens, 1997). Racial identity is defined as being “a sense of group or collective identity which is based on one’s perception that he or she shares a common racial heritage

with a particular racial group” (Helms, 1990, p. 3). Understandably, researchers have identified racial identity as one of the most important and salient domains of African American adolescent females’ identity development (Shorter-Gooden & Washington, 1996).

Racial identity has been found to influence general behavioral outcomes of African American adolescents. This is because a strong African American identity is important for the development of coping skills and resilience against factors that may hinder the advancement of African American adolescents (McCreary, Slavin & Berry, 1996; Parham, 1993; Slavin, Rainer, McCreary & Gowda, 1991; Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990). For example, McCreary and Slavin (1996) found that African American adolescents that constantly see, hear, and accept negative views of African Americans may be more likely to act negatively and to feel negatively about themselves. However, those adolescents who hold positive attitudes about their own race may be partially protected against negative stereotypes and may be better prepared to withstand internal and/or external pressures to behave and feel negatively. Crocker and Major (1989) suggest that members of marginalized groups are able to maintain high self-esteem even in view of negative images or stereotypes that may exist about them, in part because they use such strategies as in-group comparison.

This has implications for understanding the ways in which racial identity shapes sexual scripting processes. As African American adolescents tend to compare themselves to those like themselves rather than the majority culture, the degree to which the messages they receive about their racial group are either positive or negative will shape their usage of sexual scripts. Understanding how a person views herself or himself within this context is important, as sexual behaviors reflect more about an individual’s view and feeling about the self as a sexual being, rather than the sexual act itself (Kimmel & Fracher, 1992; Longmore, 1998). In turn, how an individual views herself or himself has been shown to be instrumental in overriding the effects of external stereotyped messages (see Wheeler & Petty, 2001).

Thus, when framing identity within the context of sexual scripts, it is clear that ideas about gender and racial identity are of particular importance for negotiating the enactment of these scripts. Although there has been little research examining how gender and racial identity together shape African American adolescent women’s identity development and/or directly affect the development of their sexual selves, general non-sexual behavioral findings indicate that these two constructs play a pivotal role in this process.

Conclusion

The sexual experience represents the personal and socially constructed meanings that surround a sexual event or sequence of events. Sexuality is larger than just behavioral outcomes as it represents the cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic interpretations of what sexuality is or is supposed to be. Operating on multiple levels, the socialization sources for adolescent African American women provide them with information about their sexuality

within a unique racial and gender specific context. Understanding the development of sexual scripting processes is clearly important for researchers seeking to understand the unique experiences of African American women.

This paper has introduced an alternative perspective to explore this through the integration of Black feminist thought with Simon and Gagnon's model of sexual scripting. Framed within this cultural, cohort, and socially relevant context, these sexual scripts illustrate the ways in which sexuality is bound up with racial and gender beliefs on multiple levels. The development of this alternative paradigm for understanding sexual risk behaviors reinforces the necessity of integrating gender and racial identity with sexual meanings. This, in turn, informs ideas about sexual scripts and how they influence sexual behavior. The research on African American adolescent sexual scripts will be expanded through the utilization of this perspective, opening the door for a more comprehensive analysis of this population's sexual health and experiences. With this kind of information, the development of research measures, study designs, and methods of analysis can more accurately capture and reflect the experiences of this population.

Notes

- [1] The Diva script refers to women who have sex to enhance their social status, even though they may already be financially independent and middle class or above. The Gold Digger script refers to women, particularly those who might be economically disadvantaged, who intentionally have sex for money or material goods. The Freak script refers to women who have "wild and kinky" sex with a multitude of partners for their own gratification. The Dyke script refers to self-sufficient and "hard" women who have rejected sex with men and may have adopted masculine postures. The Gangsta Bitch script refers to women who are "street tough" and who have sex to demonstrate solidarity with or to help their men, who may be involved in gangs or gangsterism. The Sister Savior script refers to the pious woman who rejects all but marital, procreative sex for religious reasons. The Earth Mother script refers to the woman who has sex for spiritual or nationalistic reasons to show her support for "the race" or "the nation". The Baby Mama script refers to any woman who has had a child by a man but is no longer his partner; she has sex to maintain a financial or emotional connection to the man through the child. For more information, see Stephens and Phillips (2003).

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