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She's Just a Friend (with Benefits):
Examining the Significance of Black American Boys' Partner Choice for Initial Sexual
Intercourse

By: Tommy J. Curry¹ and Ebony A. Utley²

Since the end of American slavery, the sexuality of Black males has been thought of as aggressive, immoral, and dangerous. Once freed from the shackles of slavery, Black men were described within most ethnological texts as animals unable to control their sexual instincts. The renowned 19th century physician George Frank Lydston once wrote that he failed to “see any difference from a physical standpoint between the sexual furor of the negro and that which prevails among the lower animals...the furor sexualis in the negro resembles similar sexual attacks in the bull and elephant, and the running amuck of the Malay race” (McGuire & Lydston, 1893, p. 17). Throughout the late 19th and early 20th century, Black male sexuality was thought to be predetermined. Whereas white men and women pursued sexual intercourse as a matter of intimacy, Black males were described as newly freed beasts who pursued sexual intercourse as a matter of their brutish instinct. Black males' sexuality and sexual choices would come to not only be matters of scientific inquiry, but the justification for legal sanction and racial segregation (Curry 2018; Stein 2015). The Negro male was simply thought to be too dangerous to white society, since his proclivities toward rape could not be ameliorated by education or socialization. As the sexologist William Lee Howard (1903) explained,

With the advent of puberty the Negro shows his genestic instincts to be the controlling factor of his life. These take hold of his religion, control his thoughts, and govern his actions. In the increase of rape on white women we see the explosion of a long train of antecedent preparation. The attacks on defenseless white women are evidences of racial instincts that are about as amenable to ethical culture as is the inherent odor of the race. When education will reduce the large size of the Negro's penis... then will it also be able to prevent the African's birthright to sexual madness and excess (p. 424).

The inability to consider how Black boys make choices and reflectively engage in sexual intercourse has been a common conceptualization of Black males from ethnology to contemporary gender theory.

Throughout the mid-20th century, Black boys' early age of first intercourse was used as evidence of their hypersexuality and savagery. In Abram Kardiner and Lionel Ovesey's 1951 book *The Mark of Oppression* (1951) they argued that unlike their white middle class counterparts who learn about sex from their mothers and fathers in stable nuclear families, Black boys “learn about sex in the streets” (p. 68) In middle class white families, young boys and girls are slowly socialized into full sexual intercourse through dating and masturbation. For middle

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class white boys, “masturbation generally begins early six to eight. On the whole, masturbation does not play much of a role in the growing lower-class boy. This is due to the early opportunities for relations with women. First, intercourse at seven or nine is not uncommon, and very frequent in early adolescence usually with girls much older” (Kardiner & Ovesey, 1951, p. 68). Kardiner and Ovesey introduced the idea that lower class Black boys never actually matured sexually as whites did. The lower-class Black boy simply *has sex*.

This emergent framework viewing lower class Black masculinity as a subculture that glorified hyper-sexuality, violence, aggression, and rape, would come to be the dominant interpretive schema of Black male sexuality for decades to come (Amir 1971; Brownmiller 1975; Wolfgang and Ferracutti, 1967). In fact, it is Susan Brownmiller’s theorization of the relationship between Wolfgang and Ferracutti’s idea of the subculture and Menachem Amir’s analysis of rape that undergirds much of our present thinking about racialized masculinity. Brownmiller (1975) argues that a subculture of violence theory assumes “within the dominant value system of our culture there exists a subculture formed of those from the lower classes, the poor, the disenfranchised, the black, whose values often run counter to those of the dominant culture...The subculture, thwarted, inarticulate and angry, is quick to resort to violence; indeed, violence and physical aggression become a common way of life. Particularly for young males” (p. 180-181). Feminist theories suggesting that Black males used rape to establish dominance over Black women and participate in white patriarchal culture became more common explanations of intra-racial violence in the 1970s. Lynn Curtis’s *Violence, Race, and Culture* (1975) claimed that Black-Black patterns of rape were Black men’s attempts to use violence to lay claim to white patriarchal norms. Similarly, Joyce Williams and Karen Holmes (1981) argued that Black males imitate white men through the use of rape against Black women. These authors suggested that Black male sexual violence not only mirrored white male patterns of patriarchal aggression but was a means through which Black men could gain power over women through violence.

Black feminist authors such as bell hooks (2004) utilized these ideas to not only describe a subculture of lower class Black males who engage in violence and gain pleasure from making others fear them (pp. 45, 50, 52) but also as a means to explain why many Black males are obsessed with sex. Rather than expressing a desire for intimacy and interpersonal connection as a way to resist the racist and sexual dehumanization the world places at the feet of Black men and boys, hooks describes Black male sexuality as obsessive, addicted, and compulsive. hooks (2004) writes: “In the iconography of black male sexuality, compulsive obsessive fucking is represented as a form of power when in actuality it is an indication of extreme powerlessness” (p. 68). The Black male does not make amorous or affectionate choices to have sex with women according to hooks, he fucks to ease his pain of not being a man. This soothing, but nonetheless fleeting moment, is what creates addiction. “Sex has been all the more addictive for black males because sexuality is the primary place where they are told they will find fulfillment. No matter the daily assaults on their manhood that wound and cripple, the black male is encouraged to believe that sex and sexual healing will assuage his pain” (hooks, 2004, p. 69).

For the last four decades the (Black) feminist theories being used to understand sexual violence in the Black community presupposed that Black men were pathologically fixated on using aggression and sexual assault as the basis of developing masculinity. Consequently, Black feminist analyses influenced by the work of bell hooks reproduce racist theories that describe Black male ontogeny as maturation towards the capacity and will to rape. A position eerily similar to the perspective of William Lee Howard in 1903. Unlike many contemporary gender analyses that pathologize the sexual choices Black men and boys use as attempts to dominate

others or compensate for their lack, this article explores the circumstances under which Black boys' initial sexual intercourse occurred with girls who were friends, but not their girlfriends. According to Manning, Giordano, & Longmore (2006a) "although most teenagers initiate sex with dating partners, many eventually have sex outside of a dating relationship. We find that 61% of sexually active teens report having had sex outside the context of a dating relationship" (p. 468). The same authors also found "that many teenagers [74%] who have sex outside of a dating relationship reported doing so with a friend" (p. 468).

Subsequent research by Giordano, Longmore & Manning (2006b) found, contrary to previous research reporting boys as less emotionally invested in romantic relationships than girls, that adolescent boys are "relatively less confident and yet more emotionally engaged in romantic relationships than previous characterizations would lead us to expect" (p. 2, 82). Previous research by Harper, Gannon, Watson, Catania & Dolcini (2004) remarked on the importance that friendships and friendship approval have to the dating process and mate selection among Black Americans. However, no current research investigates Black boys first intercourse with friends.

Youth alternatives to compulsory coupling especially friends with benefits (FWB) are common in the sexual development literature. Contrary to the previous theorizations of Black male sexuality as emotionally distant and primarily driven by obsession and conquest of another's body, our research suggests that Black boys reflectively engage in sex with friends emphasizing comfort with the selected partner, a desire for intimacy, and of course, trust. Despite the growing interest in "friends with benefits" relationships, there is no current literature investigating Black boys' choice of first sexual intercourse with friends. Friends with benefits is a term that combines "the psychological intimacy of a friendship with the sexual intimacy of a romantic relationship while avoiding the 'romantic' label" (Bisson & Levine, 2007, p. 67). FWB definitions vary greatly based on the intensity of sexual contact, ratio of nonsexual to sexual interaction, frequency of sex, partner intimacy and familiarity levels, as well as desired outcomes (Mongeau, Knight, Williams, Eden & Shaw, 2013; Furman & Shaffer, 2011; Leemiller, VanderDrift, & Kelly, 2011). There are a plethora of FWB convenience sample studies of undergraduates and even a few on high school students' FWB but both approaches minimally represent African Americans (Afifi & Faulkner, 2000; Bisson & Levine, 2009; Furman & Shaffer, 2011; Manning et al., 2006; Mongeau et al. 2013; Wentland & Reissing, 2014; Williams & Adams, 2014).

To our knowledge, there are no friends with benefits studies that focus solely on African American adolescents' experiences with initial sexual intercourse. Manning et al. (2006) claim that studies of adolescent sexuality problematize non-dating sexual relationships by "assuming that sexual liaisons that occur outside the context of conventional dating relationships are not as meaningful to adolescents and may be detrimental relative to those that occur within dating relationships" (p. 463). This problem is even greater in the predominantly pathology literature on the sexual development of Black Americans generally, and Black boys in particular. For example, in the one article investigating friends with benefits among Black Americans, the emphasis was on concurrent sexual relationships and number of sexual partners Black males had while having a girlfriend (Reed et al., 2012). Our article is the first to analyze Black males and what influences their decision to have their first sexual intercourse with girls who are friends but not their girlfriends.

Black Americans tend to have greater sexual permissiveness attitudes compared to whites often due to racial differences in religious and Puritanical attitudes towards women (Staples 2006; 1982). While this is occasionally interpreted as a positive aspect of sexual development, it

often devolves into racial stereotypes concerning all Black Americans and feeds historical tropes of hypersexuality ignoring the complexity and nuance of Black sexuality (Landor and Simon 2019). For example, Black children often have earlier sexual debuts (or first sexual intercourse) than white Americans (Upchurch et al., 1998).

The earlier sexual debut also carries certain risks wherein Black boys are more vulnerable to adult sexual violations than children of other races (Biello et al. 2013; Cavazos-Rehg et al. 2009; Curry & Utley, 2018). Because Black males lose their virginity earlier than every other racial and gender group, there has been increased efforts to explain the relationship between this group's early sexual debut and negative health consequences as well as risky sexual behaviors such as unprotected sex, sexually transmitted infections, and pregnancy (Crosby et al., 2015). Black males struggle with a prison pipeline and sundry longevity compromises that result in an imbalanced sex ratio (Curry, 2017), a later first marriage age, a higher divorce rate, and greater marital instability (Dixon, 2009). The consistent trend across disciplines describes Black male sexual activity and choices as being related to, if not wholly determining, the poor sexual health, marital and relationship problems, and hypersexuality of the Black community. However, none these approaches consider the origins of black boys' (commendable and/or risky) sexual behavior by querying the circumstances under which black adolescents' experience their initial sexual intercourse. This article fills that lacuna.

Methodology

Via an IRB-approved study, the second author interviewed 27 black men over 18 who described their sexual experiences at 18 or younger. Interviews were approximately one hour and took place over the phone. Participants were recruited via snowball sampling. The men were asked to define a sexual experience, describe their early sexual experiences, and discuss how those sexual experiences impacted them as adults. Initially, we were interested in how early experiences of sexual trauma impacted black men's adult sexual relationships. However, when we found seven men who described positive initial intercourse experiences with girls who were not girlfriends but good friends, we thought further analysis would productively contribute to understanding African American boys' sexual development.

All seven relationships were heterosexual although DaVonte self-identified as 90% gay and 10% straight. The experiences of initial intercourse took place when the boys were on average 14.86-years-old with ages ranging from 12 to 18 during the years between 1977 and 2007. On average, the men were 41-years-old at the time of the interview. None of the boys received a sexual education prior to their first intercourse experience. This small (yet broad with respect to years covered) sample size is significant because it offers a positive perspective on black adolescent initial intercourse within two generations. Our approach challenges the pathology orientation and current gender theories that focus on what is wrong with black male sexuality by asking black men to simply tell us what happened. In contrast to the literature which would interpret FWB behavior as the origins of promiscuity, we interpret it as a progressive stage of sexual development.

In an attempt to preserve the integrity of the interviews, we include the transcripts as opposed to arranging the data via themes. Aligning ourselves with Packer (2011), we support transparent data collection and presentation. We acknowledge that the interviews were co-created by interviewees and the second author whose presence should not be abstracted. An interpretive description methodology allows us to present snapshots of experiences not with the

intent of developing theory but to highlight commonalities among lived experiences that may broaden knowledge about an understudied phenomenon (Thorne, 2008).

Originating from nursing, interpretive description offers detailed descriptions of specific cases to enhance clinical understanding. Thorne, Kirkham, & O’Flynn-Magee (2004) define interpretive description as “a coherent conceptual description that taps thematic patterns and commonalities believed to characterize the phenomenon that is being studied and also accounts for the inevitable individual variations within them” (p. 4). Because transcripts are lengthy, non-pertinent conversations within the transcripts have been edited. We minimally imposed the following organizational structure in order to present the narratives by circumstance—mutual exploration, attraction, and peer pressure.

Mutual Exploration

Tom

One day in the summer after 8th grade, Tom and his ex-first girlfriend had sex for the first time.

Interviewer: Were you nervous?

Tom: Yeah.

Interviewer: Do you think that she could tell?

Tom: No—well, probably because she was nervous too. We had already established that. We just didn’t want to get her pregnant or anything so we just had to figure out what we were doing.

Interviewer: Did you practice safe sex that first time?

Tom: Yeah, I wore a condom that first time.

Interviewer: And you said you weren’t together anymore when you first had sex, how did that...?

Tom: We had just broke up. I guess just for the summer. Just you know when you’re young and just don’t really care too much for all that.

Interviewer: So you broke up but then you decided that you still wanted to have sex together?

Tom: Yeah we both lost our virginities. It was both our first time.

Relational status was less important to Tom who didn’t “really care too much for all that” than mutual acceptance—being with someone with whom he felt comfortable discussing his nervousness and concerns about preventing pregnancy. Perhaps, their familiarity as former partners increased their mutual acceptance and made their initial sexual exchange less daunting.

Richie

Richie was 16 when he had sex for the first time with his 14-year-old neighbor. They neither planned nor had a conversation about having sex together before it spontaneously happened.

Interviewer: So the first time you had sex, the little girl, did she seem to enjoy it too?

Richie: Yeah.

Interviewer: And did the two of you have sex again?

Richie: Yes. She was my—well, she wasn’t my girlfriend but she was my sex friend.

Interviewer: Did you two have a conversation about that or was she just cool?

Richie: We never talked. I'm telling you.

Interviewer: Okay and this neighbor girl was down to be your sex friend?

Richie: Yes.

Interviewer: For about how long would you guess?

Richie: 17 to about maybe 28, 30.

Interviewer: From 17 to 30?

Richie: Mmm-huh.

Interviewer: And you never had to have an "us" talk?

Richie: Nope.

Interviewer: That is an impressive woman.

Richie: Nope. Never happened.

Interviewer: Okay. Are you still friends?

Richie: Yeah. She's married. I know her husband and the whole shebang.

Initially they neither used condoms nor worried about pregnancy or STIs. In Tom's relationship, we suggested that their familiarity as former partners spurred their sexual communication specifically about preventing pregnancy. In Richie's case, a 13-year history of never initiating sexual communication may also (albeit ironically) suggest a familiarity, mutual acceptance, and extreme comfort level between two individuals that is further proven in their continued friendship post a FWB relationship.

Attraction

Xavier

Xavier was attracted to maturity. At 15, he pursued a slightly older woman with whom he shared a common interest for his first sexual experience.

Xavier: She was 18. She ran track. I ran track so we had a little thing in common. She was from Texas, spent the summer with her grandfather who was a track coach, so we spent a little time on the track. We had an attraction that led to intercourse.

Interviewer: Would you say the two of you were in a relationship?

Xavier: No, we were not.

Interviewer: So how often did you have sex, was it more than once?

Xavier: Three times that summer...She went back to Texas and that was the end of it. I never saw her again.

Interviewer: Tell me a little bit more about the very first time. Were you nervous, were you scared, were you confident?

Xavier: I was faking confidence, but yes, I was nervous. She couldn't tell.

Interviewer: Did she know it was your first time?

Xavier: No, she didn't know, but she didn't not know. That was never really discussed. But you know I was confident and I felt like I was doing... making the right moves, but on the inside I was nervous as hell. All right here we go, fake it till you make it kind of thing.

Interviewer: And did you use a condom?

Xavier: Yes.

Interviewer: Each of those three times?

Xavier: Yes.

Interviewer: And was that your idea or hers or was it mutual?

Xavier: Pretty sure it was mutual, but it was certainly my idea.

Interviewer: And then was it a pleasurable experience for both of you?

Xavier: It was. I'm proud to say that it was, yeah. But I mean after there were times after where she wanted it to happen but I didn't, so yeah. I would say it was pleasurable for her for sure.

Interviewer: Can you tell me more about that, why you didn't want it to happen?

Xavier: I was busy, it was track season, so in the summer that's our big track season. You travel a lot every weekend and practice, so I wasn't around as much.

Xavier's summer fling is noteworthy because the woman he chose contributed to his personal growth. Their sexual relationship was less of a distraction and more of an attraction based on their common affinity for track. Having sex with another track athlete allowed him to mingle his passions while eschewing a romantic relationship with her allowed him to prioritize his athletic passion.

Bodhi

Bodhi was pretending to be a sexually experienced 16-year-old by memorizing passages from the letters portion of *Penthouse Magazine* and reciting them to a girl he was attracted to. One day she challenged him to perform.

Bodhi: So I was talking on the phone with her one day and she says "Really? You know how to do all that, really?" I was like yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. She said, "Okay, well tomorrow, my mom is going to work. She works at night, and I'm going to come over to your house and then we'll go back to my house and we can do it." And I was like oh, okay and my mind was just like jumping out of my skin. I was like, "Oh fuck, this is really going to happen!"

We get to her house and, of course, I had made all these descriptions about what I was going to do. I had read all this shit and so I was trying to reenact what I had read while we were in the bed together. I was going to perform cunnilingus on her. I didn't know where her clitoris was so I was actually sticking my tongue inside of her vagina and around her vulva thinking I was really doing something. Then I sucked her breasts. And then we tongue kissed and then finally I got to penetrate a woman with my penis for the first time, and I might have ejaculated maybe a second or two and then I was just blown away because I had finally lost my virginity and she just kind of looked at me with this smirk like "Oh yeah, Mr. Experience" but at that point I couldn't even be embarrassed because I was just elated to not be a virgin anymore. So yeah, that was my first sexual experience.

Interviewer: And then what happened after? Were you and the girl still in communication? Did you have sex again?

Bodhi: Yeah, yeah. We didn't have sex again because I was so awful at it. She was just like yeah whatever dude. Years later she was working at a place in the mall and I was walking through the mall, and I saw her, and we greeted each other, and I said, "You know what? You took my virginity." She just blushed and we just kind of looked at each other and we started laughing, and she said, "Yeah I could tell you were a virgin but really?" She was very cool, very, very cool girl, very cool.

Interviewer: So you two were able to stay friends?

Bodhi: Yes, yes absolutely.

Bodhi and his friend did not use condoms, worry about pregnancy or STIs, or have sex again. His underwhelming performance may have been more forgivable because they knew each other. Their attraction had developed over a couple months beginning at the end of the school year and extending through the summer. Like Richie, Bodhi's experience lacked sexual communication but it also lacked shame and embarrassment which signals mutual respect between the sexual partners.

Peer Pressure

Frank

Frank's first sexual experience was a result of teenage peer pressure. His virginity was impediment to his social status.

Frank: I didn't know what I was doing—pressure. Seventh grade I didn't know what I was doing. Me and the young lady got off the bus together at my mom's house and [I] didn't really know what I was doing but kissing and playing and touching and trying to make penetration but by the time you make penetration it's ejaculation.

Interviewer: Was she also in the 7th grade?

Frank: She was in 8th grade.

Interviewer: And at the time would have considered her your girlfriend?

Frank: No. Friends, you know, good close friends and not a girlfriend.

Interviewer: Had you talked about sex before you actually had it or did it just happen?

Frank: Well that was in I guess the early 80s, late 70s, back then you was getting teased a lot as far as being a virgin and this and that and one thing lead to another. It was pretty much—how can I say it, calling a bluff. She said I'm a virgin, I'm telling her I'm not and we both were, but kind of like pretended we weren't and one thing lead to another.

Frank and his friend did not use condoms, worry about pregnancy or STIs. Similar to the other boys, Frank was inexperienced and uninformed about sex. He described his partner as “as a good close friend.” There was no prior romantic relationship like Tom and no extended relationship like Richie but they were able to explore sex and remain friends because of the friendship that was in place prior to any sexual activity. Furthermore, like Bodhi when “penetration is ejaculation” there was no teasing or messages of disapproval from her that created shame or embarrassment.

Thaddeaus

Thaddeaus was 18-years-old in the navy when he met a college girl named D_____ on the bus with whom he exchanged numbers. When he told his navy peers about her, they teased him.

Thaddeaus: So the white boy was like “You're going to get you some poon, huh” and another white boy was like “You're going to eat that pussy?” and another black dude is like “You're going to eat that pussy?” I was like, “Hell nah, I'm not about to do that. You're all crazy.” Now remember, I'm 18, I've never had that type of experience before.

Thaddeus and D_____ hung out “a little kissing and touching but nothing sexual,” but the next time D_____ called, a friend offered Thaddeus his car so he could finally “eat that pussy.” Thaddeus described the evening.

Thaddeus: I get over there and she’s on one. She got the house all laid out, candles and everything smelling good, she was looking good. She was like “I want you to give me a bath.” I was like okay. So I end up bathing her and everything, and she bathed me. It was cool. We start making out, and she started kissing me and stuff, and she gave me some head. I was like oh snap, I’m in the game now. I already had experience with that so I was cool with that. So she was like “You’re going to do me?” I was like, “What do you mean do you?” She was like “I gave you some head; you’re going to give me some too.” I was like, “Uh okay I don’t know what to do.” She was like “For real?” I was like, “Nah, I’ve never done that before.” She was like “I’ll teach you.” I said okay. So she told me exactly what to do. I was like hmm and then I saw her reaction to the things she was telling me to do and so I kind of responded the way she responded. I was stimulated by what she was stimulated by. I kind of figured it out and she was like yes. She was like “We cool. We good.” So she was all good and that was my first experience in oral sex at least giving it, and it’s been downhill ever since.

Interviewer: So you liked it?

Thaddeus: I did. I didn’t mind it at all. I didn’t think it was nasty. I didn’t think it was gross because one she was clean and two I guess because she took the care and tenderness to—she didn’t clown me, she didn’t make me feel bad, and here she is exposed as well as me telling me what to do to make her feel good so it was a good experience.

Interviewer: And then did you go back to the base and tell the boys you ate the pussy?

Thaddeus: I didn’t tell them anything. They figured it out on their own because I had this big grin on my face because I got more than—that lead to actual intercourse.

Interviewer: That same night?

Thaddeus: Yes. It was a good weekend.

Interviewer: And did you have sex with her again?

Thaddeus: Several times.

Interviewer: Would you have considered yourselves in a relationship?

Thaddeus: Yes and no. So one, she was a college girl. I knew she was doing whatever she wanted to do on the college campus and there was a time I’d spent the night over there, like I said, we had this extended on and off and some dude kept calling her, kept calling her, and I was like, “That’s your other dude?” She was like, “Well used to be” so I kind of knew she did whatever she wanted to do when I wasn’t there. I was like okay it’s cool. I wasn’t tripping. It was what it was. So, that’s how that happened, so relationship...not really. I wouldn’t have said oh that’s my girl, that’s D_____; that’s what she was.

D_____ was a safe space for Thaddeus. They were vulnerable together. She did not make him feel badly about his inexperience. Although eating pussy was not in his repertoire, a little push from his peers and a little care from D_____ contributed to his sexual growth. Like everyone except Tom, at first Thaddeus and D_____ did not use condoms either. It was not until her other dude called that Thaddeus realized it would be a good idea. Once Thaddeus had

confirmation of her other relationship and continued to see her, they entered into a “don’t ask, don’t tell” arrangement which is one of many manifestations of a FWB relationship.

DaVonte

DaVonte’s first sexual experience at 13 was at the behest of his 19-year-old brother.

DaVonte: He’s about to graduate or graduated from high school or whatever still living with us before he went to the Air Force. I’ve always been like an artist and a sensitive dude and we got into an argument about something and basically he was like you need to get out and go get some pussy, but he was yelling it, “You got to go get some pussy” like “Get out. Get the fuck out of here. You need some pussy.” And I think maybe he got whiff that I was gay or I don’t know what made him so mad but he kicked me out of the house that day and locked the door behind me and told me don’t come back until I got some pussy. So I was in junior high at the time and I went to go get some pussy, and I went and I fucked this girl inside of her closet.

I was attracted to her. That’s why I say 10% straight because actually around 13 I started feeling kind of attracted to women but I honestly I don’t know if it’s because I was supposed to be or because I was actually feeling it, but nonetheless, with her she was a good friend. She was somebody I found fun to be around, and safe and I knew I could experiment with her. I felt that way. I knew she was attracted to me and I knew that she accepted me for who I am. I know she would still to this day. And we were safe—it was a safe place. I could be myself with her, and I wanted to have sex with her.

Interviewer: Were her parents home? This is what it sounds like not knowing the story: your brother kicked you out, told you to go get some pussy, you run up on this white girl’s house, you have sex with her in the closet, and you go home.

DaVonte: No, no, no we had a relationship. We were very, very close friends.

Interviewer: So you just stopped by her house like you normally would?

DaVonte: Yeah we kicked it. I would go over there every once in a while.

Interviewer: But this time it was different. Did you have a conversation about it?

DaVonte: We had talked about sex before. We were friends. We were very, very close kid friends. We had talked about sex a lot of times and even let her know that I was attracted—she knew that I was attracted to her and she was attracted to me; we just never crossed that line. I got the push I needed to go forward with it. I honestly don’t think I ever would have went that far but I had to. I didn’t have a choice, and I knew she would be the person that I could do it with because we were really friends. She wanted to too, but I don’t know if we would’ve crossed that line had I not been pushed to do it. Her dad worked like 16 hour days so I don’t think he was—I know he wasn’t there. He was never there when I visited. It was always just her and her brother.

Interviewer: Did you use a condom?

DaVonte: No.

Interviewer: At that age were you concerned about pregnancy or STIs?

DaVonte: No, not at all. I heard about stuff but as a kid you don’t fucking think about it. I was 13; I was getting some pussy. That’s what I was doing. I wasn’t thinking about if it was going to be good. I wasn’t thinking about making love. I wasn’t thinking about being safe. I was thinking about getting some pussy because that’s what I was told to do.

Interviewer: Did you enjoy it?

DaVonte: Yeah I did, I did.

Interviewer: Were you surprised that you enjoyed it?

DaVonte: I think I was because I got a little high from it. I was surprised that I had sex with a girl that I liked it, and I got a little high from it.

DaVonte said she enjoyed their sex as much as he did. They had sex several more times until racial tensions ended their friendship. DaVonte explained,

We were friends for a long time but I think there was a lot of shit separating us too. It seems weird because when we were 13—what year was that? That was like 1993-4 something like that. Anyway, you wouldn't think that there were separate sides of the tracks but it still was especially in that area so we had a lot of stuff working against us to be friends anyway. We weren't able to continue being friends after a certain point because she was white and I was black, we had different paths, just different things were getting in the way. But she was my homey; I wish I could see her now. She was the homey.

Perhaps, more than the others, DaVonte spoke incredibly affirmatively about his friend. Despite his brother's insensitive decree, his first sexual experience was emotionally (although not sexually) safe—a word he used three times. For DaVonte, his first sexual experience with a friend was not only safe, but comfortable, mutually accepting, and esteem building—themes that circulate throughout all of the aforementioned narratives.

Discussion

Mutual exploration, attraction, and peer pressure are universal reasons for sexual experimentation. In that sense, these boys' experiences are not unique. Variations in the boys' levels of familiarity with their friends is acknowledged in FBW research (Mongeau et al., 2013). Sexual partner choice driven by proximity, opportunity, and familiarity is also the norm (Bisson & Levine, 2009). When the boys chose a friend as their sexual partner because of trust, safety, and positive emotions their rationales aligned with the advantages identified in FBW research with undergraduates (Bisson & Levine, 2009). This data, however, differ from traditional FBW research in four unique ways. First, most FBW are for recurring recreational sex without commitment (Bisson & Levine, 2009; Mongeau et al., 2013). Because we focused on initial intercourse, our boys' primary goal was sexual exploration. Commitment is not a concern, and recurring sex is an additional benefit not a fundamental goal in the participant's stories.

Second, as mentioned previously, none of these boys received sexual education from their parents prior to their first sexual experience, although two of them received parental sexual messages. Richie remembered his father telling him when he was about five or six, "Boy, you stick your little peanut in everything you can." Frank's parents told him "to stay safe and mainly not to have sex" and that he "better not bring no kids up in here." DaVonte's quip, "It is no such things as the birds and the bees in the motherfuckinghood" is universal in this data set. Even the two boys who received messages from their parents about sex received no sexual education. As noted previously, the early age of Black male sexual debut makes sexual education necessary (Curry & Utley, 2018).

Third, this is made even more complicated as several of the stories show that many of the young women were not only willing, but initiated sexual contact and intercourse by arranging times and meeting places alone for the purpose of sexual activity. Ott et al.'s (2012) study of adolescent boys first experience of sex noted that the "narratives from young men reveal that young women were also engaging in pre-planning by defining where and when the first sex would take place and making sure that parents were absent when intercourse happened. In most of our narratives, it was the female partner who initiated the sexual act through non-verbal and verbal cues" (p. 789). In sharp contrast to the idea of the sexually passive female who accepts or declines male sexual advances, the narratives of Black males' sexual experimentation shows the women and girls as active and agentic sexual beings who had expectations of the young Black boys they engaged in sex with.

Fourth, sexual peer pressure is unique in the black community because it is both personal and social. All of the peer pressure examples sent young boys searching for sex without any sexual education or preparation. According to Fletcher et al. (2015), "perceiving higher levels of sexual experience and risk taking among one's peers is associated with greater sexual risk taking by Black youth" (p. 200). While these common pressure instances are personal—friends, military mates, and family, two types of social pressure must also be considered. On one hand, there is a social expectation that black boy children are hypersexual beings. Because black males are stereotyped as sexually experienced (and often insatiable), black boys must figure out how to acquire that sexual sophistication. This data suggest that girl friends are a welcoming, positive, and safe space to begin the sexual exploration, sexual maturation, and the ethnic identity development process either in alignment with or contrary to the stereotype of black males as hypersexual (predators). The esteem building done by an accepting girl friend helps these boys feel interpersonally valuable in a society that devalues them daily.

On the other hand, seeking out the convenience of a girl friend can help black boys mediate the social pressures of racial discrimination perceived as threats to their masculinity. In their study of rural African American male adolescents, Kogan, Yu, Allen, Pockock, & Brody (2015) conclude "to the extent that racial discrimination posts a threat to a young man's sense of masculinity and status, sexual conquest may become an avenue for affirming his right to esteem and status" (p. 223). Although their study investigates boys with multiple sexual partners, their conclusion applies to an initial intercourse partner. This "esteem and status" acquisition is akin to the "little high" that DaVonte described when he affirmed his masculinity and his racial status by having sex with a white girl on the separate side of the track.

Absent abstinence and messages that sex should occur within the confines of a committed relationship, perhaps black children, when left to their own devices, are disinclined to couple but inclined to choose safe sexual spaces. Future research must ask, how do black children come to understand that positive sexual experiences can (and perhaps should) occur outside of normative coupled relationships? How might the first experience with a friend shape subsequent sexual relationships? Does a first experience with a friend increase the acceptance of non-monogamous relationships? What are the positive implications of sex not just outside of marriage but also outside of a recognized coupled relationship that still provides sexual comfort and esteem building? Perhaps, the pathology data about unmarried black parents overlooks the mutual acceptance and personal growth that can still be found in in non-coupled black co-parents.

Many black boys do not get to choose their first sexual partners. Previous findings have shown that young Black boys are especially vulnerable to sexual violation by older women and girls. Hernandez, Lodico, and DiClemente (1993) have noted that Black males are especially

vulnerable to child physical and sexual abuse. The exploratory study conducted by Utley and Curry (2018) also found both that the numbers of Black boys who are sexually violated by adults is woefully underreported and “adult sexual violations of Black male children may not always be seen as sexual violations by young boys because no one is instructing them about sex or male sexual victimization” (p.232). For boys who are urged to have group sex by and with older men as a rite of passage, are made to penetrate, are sexually coerced and violated by women babysitters or have their choice revoked by other adults that they trusted, choosing a friend who they actually can trust is indeed a revolutionary act of sexual agency for black boys who are forced to live with stereotypes about their sexuality and/or forced into having sex against their will.

While instructive in helping to explore how FWB relationships are unique for black boys’ first sexual experiences, the study has its limitations. It only considers the boys’ perspective which includes no FWB disadvantages (Bisson & Levine, 2009; Williams & Adams, 2013). Perhaps, the girls would have considered themselves in relationships or would have wanted to be in relationships. The girls are invisible here to the point of being nameless. We have no evidence of their motivations or agency. Second, the sample is restricted to first heterosexual experiences. Third, this is an incredibly small sample accidentally discovered within larger data asking completely different questions. Future research must not only speak to male and female (preferably both same and opposite-sex sexual partners), but should be designed specifically around first sexual experiences and perhaps pay specific attention to class and geography while comparing if and how experiences change over time.

While we conclude that girl friends may be emotionally safe when it comes to learning about sex, with the exception of Tom, all of the experiences were sexually unsafe. DaVonte said, “I wasn’t thinking about being safe. I was thinking about getting some pussy because that’s what I was told to do.” According to Mathews (2013), “Individuals who are friends may be less likely to use condoms because of a lack of communication regarding the specifics of the sexual negotiation and because there is the perception of trust” (p.13). Tom and his ex-girlfriend were likely the exception because their former status as boyfriend and girlfriend necessitated relational conversations about pregnancy that are less likely to occur between friends (Manning, Longmore, & Giordano, 2000). More research should investigate how sexual health ignorance, the absence of sexual communication, and the perception of trust impact condom use for initial intercourse among friends. If DaVonte’s reflection is applicable to not only a majority of these narratives, but also to a majority of black adolescent sexual experiences, then more research must be done about how to construct applicable sexual education programs for the hood.

Conclusion

Our research demonstrates that Black males are reflective and create positive conceptualizations of intimacy through friendship and sexual intercourse. Unlike current Black masculinity literature which often denies the sexual vulnerability and reflexivity of Black males in the United States, our research expands the foundational claims of Black male studies by introducing theories about Black men and boys informed by empirically verified claims about their social lives, their actual behaviors, and their worldview (Curry 2017; 2018; 2019). In this sense, Black males are adaptive social and sexual beings. Stereotypes concerning the violence of Black males often extend into all lives within the literature on Black boys. The stereotype that Black males are sexually aggressive is often dictating how scholars write about the socialization of

young Black boys into rape culture and misogyny. Some Black feminist and social scientists have both perpetuated the idea that young, urban Black males define their masculinity through the rape of women, violence, or sexual promiscuity (hooks 1990; Lewis 2007). The presumption that female objectification is part of Black male socialization, without any research into the actual socialization forces at play in the lives of young Black boys, pre-emptively categorizes Black male sexual development as pathological and exploitative. The inability to recognize Black male sexual vulnerability on the one hand which includes questions of sexual trauma and statutory rape (Curry & Utley, 2018), and the anxiety and pensiveness Black boys have regarding their first sexual intercourse on the other, produces a rigid deviant subject—the always already rapist—in gender theory. As the narratives of these Black men show, Black boys think about and actively contemplate how they imagine their first intercourse. In sharp contrast to contemporary theories concerning Black male sexuality, Black boys demonstrate an investment into their sexual innocence and first experience beyond eliminating the stigma of virginity. This evidence shows that previous works by Black feminists (hooks, 1990; 2004; Garfield, 2010) linking manhood to sexual conquest need to be questioned and reconsidered using the phenomenological weight Black males attach to their sexual debut.

These men retrospectively describe the girls and their first sexual experiences extremely positively. Within their narratives are expressions of sexual comfort, safety, mutual acceptance, personal growth, and esteem building. Although we cannot make any definitive arguments from this small sample of black boy's first intercourse experiences, we can highlight how these surprise preliminary findings point to the need for nuanced research questions for scholars of race, early sexual development, FWB, and possibly nonmonogamy. The racist underpinnings of black sexuality pathology literature must no longer narrow the scope of questions scholars ask about early black sexual development.

Previous literature on Black masculinity has failed to answer questions about Black male sexuality with empirically situated evidence or any ethnographic explorations into Black boys' sexual choices. Because Black male sexuality is almost exclusively interpreted through hyper-masculinity tropes, the literature investigating the sexual vulnerability of Black men and boys (Curry 2017; 2019), and the choices they make regarding their sexual debut is not only woefully behind the research on other groups, but practically non-existent. Hypermasculinity, hypersexuality, and other paradigms insisting that Black males are driven toward their first sexual intercourse to compensate for their lack of masculinity and powerlessness is far too narrow and limiting of a perspective to discuss how Black males actually participate in their first sexual experience. The stories of these Black men recollecting about their youth show indecisiveness, naivety, and nervousness. Contrary to the articulation of Black boys as being obsessed with sex and dedicated to the objectification of women and girls, these narratives show hesitancy, fantasy, and curiosity during their first sexual experiences. Like other sexually inexperienced groups, Black boys had fond memories of their first sexual partners. They were embarrassed by their inexperience and used friendship to comfort their nervousness and establish safety during their sexual debut. In short, conversations concerning Black males must be informed by an actual knowledge of Black males gained from the experiences of Black men and boys as they express them.

Black boys have historically been thought of as beasts driven towards sex by primal urges. The trope of Black males as misogynists who aim to harm women and girls through sex and violence is rarely interrupted by actual investigations that provide context and evidence of how Black males think about their own actions and intimate events in their own lives. For young

Black boys the choice to have sex with a friend entails a freedom to positively construct aspects of their lives that remains negated by anti-Black misandry (Curry 2018), and academic theory alike (Curry 2017). Gender theories that continue to frame Black males as pathological should be challenged and reoriented based on the ever-expanding knowledge scholars gain from the careful and attentive studies of Black men and boys. The findings of this study emphasize the need to heavily scrutinize, if not outright reject, theories about Black males that do not have some basis in their lived experience or the specific socio-cultural location they occupy. Given the salience of long disproven myths viewing Black males as sexual predators, it is necessary to view any theories of Black masculinity (be they feminist or otherwise) that continue historical sexual stereotypes against Black males without proper cultural contextualization and experiential inquiry with moral indignation, if not outright condemnation.

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