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"In My Feelings": Millennial African Americans' Perception, Understanding, and Experience of Healthy Romantic Relationships

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this research is to assess how millennials experience romantic relationships since they are at the prime age and technological advancement of dating. How African American partners in particular, develop concepts of healthy romantic relationships before or negating to say, "I Do", is still an underexplored area. Using semi-structured interviews, ten respondents who self-identify as predominately dating a different sex, provided narratives exploring the impacts of gendered racialized inequalities. Feelings of having a healthy self, increased discussion about relationship flexibility, and the negotiation of heteronormative gender performances and expectations were overarching themes that emerged from these narratives. My findings contribute to shortening the gap between African American self-definitions and that of the larger Eurocentric culture.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

> *"Black men and women have always been pitted against each other.*
> *We've been made to believe so many lies about each other,*
> *and that's why I think our loving each other,*
> *whether it's expressed through friendship or marriage or both,*
> *is a revolutionary act. It means that we're able to*
> *see and accept the truth in each other, and in ourselves."*
> — *Hill Harper*

Adult milestones like marriage and financial independence have taken longer for the millennial generation in comparison to previous American generations (Frey 2018; Risman 2018). Although millennials are the highest educated generation in US history, more young adults live with their parents than with a romantic partner (Frey 2018; Risman 2018). Moreover, the rising accrual of college debt and jobs without livable wages push millennials into their thirties before reaching financial independence (Risman 2018). Millennials, born 1981-1996, delay marriage and remain single for longer periods of time due to the assumption of financial stability as a prerequisite for getting married (Cherlin 2004; Dimock 2019; Risman 2018). In previous generations, adulthood was reached when young adults left home, went to college, and/or got married (Risman 2018).

The institution of marriage was a necessary way of ensuring children their father's protection and inheritance, wives with their husband's protection and property rights, and enforced trust between spouses with legal agreements (Cherlin 2004). The practical aspects of marriage have become less foundational to the success of an adult life (Cherlin 2004; Risman 2018). More recently, cohabiting couples have gained legal rights that were previously reserved for married couples. Cherlin (2004) contends marriage has evolved from a marker of conformity to a marker of prestige for those who are able to achieve it. The order of marriage in the life course has changed, but its symbolic importance as a major life goal has persisted (Cherlin 2004; Johnson

and Loscocco 2015). Marriage has been normalized as the healthy, inevitable end goal of achieving adulthood (Risman 2018). However, is marriage the only way to have healthy romantic relationships?

Research on what constitutes healthy heteronormative relationships and ideal partner selection is limited to married couples (Barr and Simons 2018; Browne 2014; Chaney 2014; King and Allen 2009; Perry 2013; Sassler, Cunningham and Lichter 2009; Stackman et al. 2016). This simply means most articles on healthy relationships and partners are centered around married participants. Literature pertaining only to married couples suggests that healthy relationships exist within the context of marriage but does little to provide the road map of how couples develop relationship beliefs and practices.

There are few studies that focus on romantic relationships in the dating and cohabiting stage (Stackman, Reviere, and Medley 2016). Moreover, the little research that does highlight non-marital romantic relationships consists of predominantly middle-class white couples (Johnson and Loscocco 2015). This limited research is falsely set as the standard of all experiences in different-sex relationships. How African American partners, in particular, develop concepts of healthy romantic relationships before or negating to say "I Do" is still an underexplored area.

The few studies that focus on African American romantic relationships in general, still define healthy relationships in the context of being marriage-minded (Bell, Bouie, & Baldwin 1990; Burgest 1990; Johnson and Loscocco 2015). In these studies, healthy relationships were defined as egalitarian with the end goal of marriage. African American relationship studies described egalitarian relationships as partnerships that include a shared division of labor, commitment to investing in the larger African American community, interdependence, and collective career and family aspirations. Egalitarian relationships counter dominant patriarchal ideas that present the

wife as merely an extension or property of their spouse with goals that should mirror their husband's. Emphasis on mutuality and reciprocity are seen as Afrocentric ideals essential to the maintenance of African American relationships that are in direct contrast to Eurocentric beliefs (Aborampah 1989; Perry 2013). Therefore, healthy African American relationships are seen to differ from healthy relationships of non-African descent backgrounds. Still, the relationships described by this literature are primarily marriages, or relationships that individuals expected will eventually lead to marriage. The development and progression of healthy African American relationships, particularly those outside of the marriage context, needs more scholarly attention.

Furthermore, most research on the topic of different-sex, romantic relationship construction in the African American community has a problem-centered approach (Aborampah 1989; Bell et al.1990, Hutchinson 1999; Phillips, Wilmoth, and Marks 2012). Research on African American relationships usually focuses on differing customs and beliefs that are deemed abnormal or deviant in comparison to dominant Eurocentric culture (Aborampah 1989; Bell et al.1990, Hutchinson 1999; Phillips et al. 2012; Stacks 1975). As a result, the heteronormative African American romantic relationship framework is defined within the parameters of gendered schemas and a history of enslavement and discrimination (Webb, Littlefield, & Okundaye 2014). For example, most articles cite reasons why African Americans are less likely to marry, have less access to jobs that increase relationship conflicts, and have more superficial connections, which are all viewed as negative in Western cultures (Burgest 1990; Webb et al 2014).

A Eurocentric approach limits existing literature because it implies an inherent or race-based inferiority of African Americans compared to the larger American society (Aborampah 1989; Bell et al. 1990; Hutchinson 1999; Phillips et al. 2012). There are two dominant perspectives within the literature of African American romantic relationships. In the first, researchers use a

Eurocentric lens to explore African American phenomena (Aborampah 1989; Bell et al. 1990; Hutchinson 1999; Perry 2013; Phillips et al. 2012; Stacks 1975). In the second, scholars challenge the Eurocentric perspective of the existing research (King 1999; McGruder 2009; Reviere 2001).

The first approach to African American romantic relationships, using a Eurocentric lens or point of view, examines research without regard to one's positionality and does not take into context the separate culture of the population studied (Aborampah 1989; Bell et al. 1990; Hutchinson 1999; Perry 2013; Phillips et al. 2012; Reviere 2001). Positionality, how your intersectional identities influence your interpretation of the world, directly determines the outcomes, results, and how research is executed. Researchers must be aware of centuries of hatred, discrimination, and denials of opportunity within marginalized communities (Reviere 2001). More importantly, Eurocentric scholars' interpretations of African American experiences are created in an environment where assumptions and beliefs birthed from racial oppression still persist. "Eurocentric research criteria of objectivity, reliability, and validity are inadequate and incorrect, especially for research involving human experiences" (Reviere 2001: 709). The Eurocentric approach, also taken by African American researchers, centers on disparities that exist within the African American community that hinder them from achieving relationships consistent with the larger American culture.

The second approach is an alternative Afrocentric worldview. Afrocentrism is defined as the reclamation and self-definition of African American experiences in the context of African culture (Aborampah 1989; Bell et al. 1990; Collins 2000; Perry 2013). For example, the natural hair movement that emerged in the 2000s was a call to African American women to reclaim their own beauty standards by embracing and wearing their natural hair texture rather than using

damaging chemicals and styling tools that validate Eurocentric standards of wearing straightened hair (Byrd & Tharps 2014; Tribble, Allen, Hart, Francois, & Smith-Bynum 2019). African American hair is a controversial aspect of African American identity that stems from chattel slavery and spills over into romantic relationship construction (Byrd and Tharps 2014; DeGruy 2005; Tribble et al. 2019). The negotiation of controversial topics like the natural hair debate often play out in romantic relationships. Romantic partners can either perpetuate gendered and racialized socialization or reinforce cultural pride around things as simple as hair.

Additionally, many scholars advocate for going back to "appropriate" Afrocentric rites of passages and practices, or at minimum, accurately passing down African American history (Aborampah 1989; Bell et al. 1990; Reviere 2001; Webb et al. 2004). Inappropriate rites of passage are rituals that are harmful to an individual and group. One widely known example, is the practice of female genital mutilation (Aborampah 1989). Any deviation from the Euro-American pattern is considered abnormal; therefore, appropriate customs should be defined within the African American community (Collins 2000; Hutchinson 1999). The narrative of reclaiming and redefining one's own experiences is embraced by authors of varying races.

The Eurocentric approach analyzes individual, or private relationship troubles of African Americans without considering their larger context. The Afrocentric approach frames the way research is being presented, from a Western Eurocentric lens, as a "public issue". The Afrocentric approach then offers to resolve these concerns by recovering identities that existed prior to colonization (Aborampah 1989). Although the latter ideology presents a resolution to relational conflict, this literature doesn't spell out what healthy non-marital relationships looks like to African Americans. There is still a gap in the literature on how African Americans

maintain healthy non-marital relationships (Barr & Simons 2018; Browne 2014; Chaney 2014; King and Allen 2009; Perry 2013; Sassler, Cunningham, & Lichter 2009; Stackman et al. 2016).

Overall, existing healthy relationships outside the confines of marriage have been downplayed in American research (Stackman et al. 2016). Few authors who review healthy relationships in the dating stages, still focus on attitudes towards marriage or ideal marriage partners (Barr & Simons 2018; Browne 2014; Chaney 2014; Johnson & Loscocco 2015; King & Allen 2009; Perry 2013; Sassler, Cunningham, & Lichter 2009). My research examines healthy relationship perceptions without a marriage-minded lens which departs from the focus of much of the previous literature. Given the fact that millennials are less likely to marry and tend to marry later in the life course, my research examines how millennials perceive healthy relationships. Furthermore, I focus specifically on millennials who identify as African American and their ideas about healthy, non-marital relationships to counter the Eurocentric, problem-centered approach to African American relationship experiences that is dominant in the literature.

I became interested in this topic in reflecting on how I have experienced few lasting romantic relationships. Additionally, the collective experiences of family and friends have mirrored my own. As a single, African American woman, I began a quest to define and maintain a healthy romantic relationship. Couples who self-identify as being in a healthy relationship experience their romantic involvement in four components: (1) perceptions of self, partner, and the relationship; (2) foundational expectations and every day expectations; (3) couple's interactions that solidify the expectations and perceptions; and (4) an individual's awareness to their partner's needs and reactions (Young and Kleist 2010).

After taking in many books, podcasts, articles, and blogs on this phenomenon, I noticed the generational trend of "low success" romantic relationships within the African American community (Aborampah 1989, Karenga 1982; Stewart 2019. I wanted to know how my peers, other millennials, make meaning of what is successful and healthy in a relationship. My research is aimed at assessing how African American millennials perceive and define relationship health and success.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Many millennials', adults at the ages 24-39 at the time of this writing, decision to either delay or forego marriage counters existing marital norms in the U.S. (Dimock 2019; Risman 2018). The median age of marriage in 2015 was 29 for women and twenty-seven for men. This is a 45 percent increase from the 1950s median age of 20 for women and 22 for men (Frey 2018). As detailed below, young adults' reasoning for their current dating and marital beliefs are attributed to numerous reasons.

Millennial Romantic Relationships

Most millennials' median income is $2,000 less than what young adults made in 1980 (U.S. Census 2015). This income deficit results in more young adults living with their parents and waiting to get married (Frey 2018). More couples are opting for non-traditional unions like living apart together and long-distance relationships. Living apart together refers to relationships wherein two individuals are in a committed, long-term relationship, but keep separate residences and finances (Lewin 2017). Both living-apart-together and long-distance arrangements have proven that being physically together is not necessary for a relationship to be emotionally close (Janning, Gao, and Snyder 2018).

Marriage and dating relationships in America have changed drastically in the last fifty years (Amato 2012). More importantly, the institution of marriage is becoming less important as a necessary stepping-stone to adult life and most similar to one of many alternatives (Cherlin 2004; Risman 2018). Shows like *Modern Family* demonstrate the shift of companionate marriage to the alternatives of cohabiting, same-sex marriages, second marriages, consensual non-monogamy, and blended families (Cherlin 2004; Smith 2017). The transformation to considering marriage as more individualistic is most apparent in the emergence of new divorce laws and

ideals of self-fulfillment over obligation to one's partner (Cherlin 2004). Millennials in general prioritize "happiness" and "individuality" more than success and immediate relationships (Risman 2018). Furthermore, millennials are more divided on their views of gender norms and expectations and more individualized in relationships than previous generations (Amato 2012; Risman 2018). Despite differing expectations of gender norms and the normalization of marriage alternatives, most millennials still value marriage as a the most committed and esteemed form a relationship can take —even as they see it as increasingly optional (Risman 2018).

Another reason millennials are marrying later or not at all is their family of origin. Parents who have multiple romantic unions and marriage, cohabiting and divorce transitions are passed down generationally (Barr et al. 2018; Sassler et al. 2009). While the numbers of transitions are important, the kinds of relationships parents are experiencing in general also influence future relationships for their children. For example, households where parents cohabitated prior to marriage or remarriage, conveys different messages to children than no transitions or direct transitions from divorce to remarriage (Sassler et al. 2009; Wolfinger 2005). Wolfinger (2005) concludes that parents are seen as role models and those that are divorced may send reduced commitment signals to their children passed generationally in a process known as the divorce cycle. Moreover, children who experienced their parents divorcing were more likely to enter into cohabitating unions and reported less relationship satisfaction and perceptions of stability (Sassler et al. 2009). This research identifies cohabitation as a normative step before marriage while other researchers have identified cohabitation as an alternative route to marriage (Chaney 2014; Risman 2018).

While African Americans view monogamy as the most common form of romantic relationships, other practices such as emphasizing egalitarianism over patriarchy and cohabiting

in lieu of marriage differ from the Eurocentric majority (Aborampah 1989; Best, Hense, & Fortenberry 2014; Chaney 2014; Perry 2013). One article notes cohabiting relationships of African American couples are more likely to lead to single parent homes, dissolution, and foregoing marriage (Chaney 2014). Lack of exposure to healthy and lasting relationships and marriages within the community is a strong determinant of marital beliefs (Barr et al. 2018). Therefore, an African American couple's decision to forego marriage can reflect the perception that a lasting marriage as unachievable.

Impacts of Race

Although family of origin experiences significantly shape beliefs regarding marriage and relationships, these encounters are more or less salient depending on the race of the household (McLoyd, Cauce, Takeuchi, & Wilson 2000). Specifically, African American households place a greater emphasis on extended family bonds that expand to the community. The survival of African American families during slavery and post racial oppression was dependent on support outside of the nuclear family unit (Johnson & Loscocco 2015). During slavery, families were often ripped apart by murders and slave trades (DeGruy 2005; Truesdale-Moore 2017). To preserve the continuation of the African American family, extra-familiar bonds developed in the form of "God" mothers or "play" fathers (Stacks 1975). These bonds, also known as kin, hold an additional level of obligation and accountability towards one another (Stacks 1975). God mothers or play fathers perform childcare, provide financial resources, and mentor in the absence of or in addition to one's primary guardian (Stacks 1975). In contrast, Euro-Americans' godmothers may not involve themselves in childcare activities as the concept is more symbolic (Lopez & Hamilton 1997). Formation of group ideals surrounding relationship perceptions occurs within extended community social institutions.

The church is the most prominent social institution in the African American community. The African American church has long been proven to be the spiritual and social bedrock of the African American community (DuBois 1903; Copeland 2017; Phillips et al. 2012). Church was the only social institution that African Americans could reliably have during the slavery era. Participation in religious practices and activities was the only consistent means of freedom for those enslaved (Collins 2000; Copeland 2017; Phillips et al. 2012). This influenced how African Americans value church and religion after slavery and presently.

Additionally, the African American church reinforces the patriarchal gender binary. A known example of this ideology is the traditional belief that men should take the lead in and initiate romantic relationships. (Johnson & Loscocco 2015). African Americans that may not be practicing Christianity, may still be influenced by men leading relationship beliefs because of the influence of church on the larger community. African Americans romantic beliefs are altered by a combination of their life course development and their own relationship experiences, much like other races. However, the lives of African Americans are also shaped by survival adaptations during slavery and variations of current systematic oppression as well (Collins 2000; DeGruy 2005; DuBois 1903). The origins of African American disparities are numerous, complex, and involve support tailored to the needs of African Americans (Aborampah 1989; Bell et al.1990; Collins 1990). Therefore, African American romantic beliefs are formed within the legacy of broken marriages and romantic relationships because of slavery and current racial oppression.

Many scholars point out the sex-ratio imbalance of marriageable men as a key source for forming relational habits, beliefs, and outcomes (Aborampah 1989; Barr et al. 2018; Karenga 1979; King et al. 2009; Peteet, McCuistian, & Lige 2014). There are 88 males per 100 female ratios in the African American community overall (Aborampah 1989; Barr et al. 2018; Karenga

1979; King et al. 2009; Peteet et al. 2014). The main beliefs around the sex/ratio imbalance is the ideal that the African American men hold more power in the maintenance and negotiation of the relationship because of the scarcity of available men (Aborampah 1989; Barr et al. 2018; Karenga 1979; King et al. 2009; Peteet et al. 2014). However, scarcity and ratio imbalance has been around for decades, therefore it does not explain the complete picture (Aborampah 1989; Barr et al. 2018; Karenga 1979; King et al. 2009; Peteet et al. 2014). Many African American men are incarcerated due to facing more criminalized forms of racial prejudice, so the number of available men is even smaller (Alexander 2010). Furthermore, the growth of cohabiting unions and higher incarceration rates help explain lower different-sex marriage rates within the community (Alexander 2010; Risman 2018). This makes my focus on non-marital relationships all the more important. Additionally, this supports my focus on different-sex couples because of the intersections of race and gender on African American romantic relationships.

Impact of Gender

Gender scripts that create and perpetuate unequal romantic roles are also racialized (Alexander 2010; Collins 2000; Johnson & Loscocco 2015). Gender is interactional and situational and has been described as an enactment of "doing gender," since it is something that can be taken off like a role (West & Zimmerman 1987; Truesdale-Moore, 2017). Gender is understood to be something you do in the situatedness of social interactions. West and Zimmerman (1987) conclude that doing gender is seen as a dramaturgical performance that is accomplished by an individual.

African American men and women are not exempt from assuming false racial and sexist stereotypes about themselves that have been perpetuated in American culture (Collins 2000; Webb et al. 2004). Centuries of racialized media propaganda promoting African American men

as lazy and African American women as promiscuous are often internalized (Abormapah 1989; Burgest 1990; Collins 2000). One's sexual reputation or gossip surrounding an assumed reputation can permeate African American male/female relationships in the form of sexual games (Burgest 1990; Eaton & Rose 2011; Hutchinson 1999; Stacks 1974). Sexual games are rules and mind-games that use sex as bait or leverage to manipulate or control a partner (Burgest 1990; Stacks 1975). One common sexual game that appears in movies like, "*Two Can Play That Game*" and Steve Harvey's self-help book turned comedy, "*Act Like a Lady, Think Like A Man,*" is the 90 rule (Copeland 2017). The 90 rule applies to women who withhold sex with a new romantic partner for at least ninety days, similar to that of a probationary period at a new job. Women may withhold sex as a bargaining tool due to them feeling it is the only power they have (Burgest 1990; Eaton and Rose 2011).

Within gendered schemas exist gender initiation and management of roles (Jaramillo-Sierra Allen and Kaestle 2017; Sassler et al. 2009). Men possess a hidden power in determining initiation of romantic involvement and relationship course. This power is demonstrated when women wait to be asked to initiate a relationship or further commit due to "tradition" (Sassler & Miller 2011). Moreover, some women feel reassured when a man asks them out because it assures their interest. In contrast, when women initiate relationships or commitment and are rejected, they feel rejection is a worthy punishment for breaking traditional gender norms (Lamont 2014). Lamont (2014), found women reconciled their desire for egalitarian relationships while unconsciously upholding gender norms by attributing their lack of leadership to their personality and attributing leadership qualities to be a part of men's biology.

Relationships are more likely to succeed when men initiate pivotal moments like cohabitating or getting engaged (Sassler & Miller 2011). For African American men, their initial

encounter with their partner determined the relationship pathway and progression. Browne's (2014) study described men who were physically attracted initially and were more likely to marry their partner and initiate commitment steps like getting engaged. Physical attraction was defined as the way men positively described a woman's physical appearances and how she comported herself. Initial physical attraction differed from those who experienced initial sexual attraction, which was attraction based solely on pursuing sexual relations with a woman. Alternatively, men who were initially emotionally or sexually attracted to their partners were least likely to want to marry them. As a result, men who only experienced initial emotional or sexual attractions, did not initiate further commitments like cohabitating or getting engaged and rejected their partner's initiation to do so. Although men are socialized to actively pursue sex, they are not socialized to be emotionally vulnerable and receptive of their partners (Browne 2014; Wise 2001). Therefore, if the initial attraction fades, men are less inclined to continue the relationship.

Another way gender displays itself in relationships is in conflict resolution. In one study, Jaramillo-Sierra et al. (2017) found women handled their anger with their romantic partner differently than men. Women internalized their anger by holding in partner offenses or attributing the offense to their own character flaws. In addition, the women in this study misplaced anger towards other people or activities. In contrast, men directly expressed anger towards their women counterparts when upset. Jaramillo-Sierra et al. (2017) concluded that women are socialized to internalize or misdirect anger while men are conditioned to express aggressive traits like anger.

African American men in particular have a heightened view of masculinity and their role in romantic relationships because constructions of African American masculinity and manhood

are shaped in light of interlocking oppression (Wise 2001). African American men's masculinity is defined in relation to gender, negotiations of black manhood, and their situatedness in the U.S. Masculinity is equated to strength, regardless of sexual orientation for African American men who work to create a self-identity within a society that is often hostile and combative (Collins 2000; Wise 2001; Totten 2015).

In a labor market that exploits and undermines African American men, when both genders still assume the men to be the primary provider is damaging to their ideals of Eurocentric masculinity (Collins 2000; Dixon 1998; Perry, Archuleta, Martell, & Teasley 2018; Webb et al. 2004; Wise 2001). When asked of particular instances, African American men report more racist discrimination when seeking employment and attaining fair wages (Ifatunji & Harnois 2016). Ifatuniji and Harnois (2016) concluded this could be attributed to men being perceived as a greater threat to group position of an organizations culture than African American women. This creates relationship power struggles of African American men pursuing finances at the emotional expense of their partner due to receiving limited employment opportunities (Dixon 1998; Perry et al. 2018; Stacks 1974). This posture results in some African American men exhibiting hypermasculinity and is assumed to be a source of dignity for African American men that are otherwise marginalized and excluded from Eurocentric ways of masculinity (Collins 2000; Webb et al. 2004; Wise 2001).

African Americans have always had to negotiate new ways to express masculinity, femininity, and experience romantic relationships (Johnson & Loscocco 2015; Stewart 2019 Truesdale-Moore 2017; Wise 2001). The institution of marriage and other relationship rights were not recognized during enslavement. As a result, partners were forcibly separated leaving wives and children cast aside, enduring past Emancipation (Stewart 2019; Truesdale-Moore

2017). Continuing until the Civil Rights era, African American romantic relationships were broken up yet again due to racialized "man-in-the-house" policies. These policies forced fathers to choose between raising children in house or receiving very much needed economic assistance with him absent from the house (Stewart 2019). African Americans were unable to rely on dominant understandings of how to act in romantic relationships and had to continually adapt to social changes around them.

Theoretical Framework

Cherlin (2004) states that when social change produces situations outside the reach of established norms, individuals have to come up with new ways of acting. Relationship cultural scripts are seen to provide comfortability and uniformity to the ambiguous world of dating (Eaton & Rose 2011). When these norms or cultural scripts that define people's behavior in social institutions such as romantic relationships are weakened it creates a process known as deinstitutionalization (Cherlin 2004). Cherlin (2012) suggests that the process of deinstitutionalization is more advanced among African Americans. African Americans' ideals of relationships and marriage have always differed from Westernized or white male perspectives (Collins 2009; Johnson & Loscocco 2015; Stewart 2019) Thus, African Americans tend to have a different set of norms or scripts in navigating romantic relationships since they were not afforded a routinized way of having intimate relationships.

Individualization theory coined by Cherlin (2004) states there are few norms or scripts for how to build and maintain a relationship, so couples must forge their own path forward. This transition from companionate relationship models to individualized partnerships began in the 1960s (Amato 2012; Cherlin 2004). This theory mainly applied to the institution of marriage specifically addresses how spouses create and redefine norms and expectations for their

relationship. This first aspect of the theory is known as self-development. The theory examines the aspects of how roles within a marriage are negotiable and flexible. In addition, the individualized theory defines communication and openness in tackling conflict as essential for maintaining these ever-changing romantic relationships (Cherlin 2004; Cherlin 2020).

The literature suggests that young people and millennials in particular appear more likely to hold individualized understandings of relationships, especially but not only marriage. I sought to explore whether African Americans have this same sort of understanding. Research on healthy African American romantic constructions is needed in all dating stages to determine the origin and sustainability of such perspectives. There are many studies on African Americans' ideal partner traits and how partner selection is initiated. Little research has been conducted concerning the process of finding a suitable partner and the eventual decision to commit to that partner long-term (King et al. 2009; Stackman et al. 2016). The key question of Individualized theory is as conditions in relationships change so can the choice of what schemas to use (Cherlin 2020).

Applying Individualized Theory

Dubois (1903) and Collins (2000) discuss the duality or intersectionality of being African American in the United States. The combination of race, gender, generational (millennial), and economic status are considered when evaluating how African Americans make individualized choices about romantic relationships. As institutional actors there are multiple cultural schemas available when determining how best to navigate intimate relationships (Cherlin 2020).

African American trajectory of relationships is drastically different from their European counterparts (Stewart 2019). Scholars have defined three periods in U.S. history that has led to more egalitarian and individualized ways of behaving in romantic relationships (Cherlin 2020).

However, sharing both domestic and paid labor has been a part of Afrocentric culture well before slavery and institutional racism (Aborampah 1989; Collins 2009). Recently, Cherlin (2020) discussed how non college-educated young adults wait to pursue serious intimate relationships until they overcome the pain that their upbringing has caused them from childhood trauma and recent struggles. This study seeks to address if this individualized sense of developing a healthy self prior to relationships fit African Americans in general, regardless of college-educated status because of intersectional oppression. Historically, marriage has been a form of cultural capital denied to African Americans. Therefore, marriages may be deinstitutionalized in the African American community to accommodate fulfilling other necessary milestones like achieving generational wealth and education first. This helps explain why college-educated African Americans may have lower percentages of achieving traditional markers of relationship success compared to their other race counterparts (Cherlin 2020; Johnson & Loscocco 2015).

African Americans have many cultural schemas and external constraints that may counteract their efforts of establishing and maintaining healthy romantic relationships. Dating relationships are no longer by force and looked upon as a choice now instead of requirement to adulthood (Cherlin 2020). More importantly, I address if the intersections of race, economic, and generational status make this even more true for African Americans. Generally, open communication with one's partners and flexible, negotiable roles is more visible in young adult romantic relationships (Amato 2012; Cherlin 2020). Hence my focus on individualization in my research on millennials (Amato 2012; Risman 2018). Young adults tend to have both their parental cultural scripts and their own to pull from when dating. The restraints couples are against when deciding to be individualized in their choices of partner sections and relationship

maintenance are institutionalized racism, generational poverty and trauma, and lack of representation of successful relationship scripts (Stewart 2019).

As mentioned above, most research on African Americans come from a problem-centered approach and solely focuses on the marriage stage (Phillips et al. 2012). As indicated in the examination of previous literature, marriage has traditionally been a marker of relationship success. However, more couples are foregoing this formal union and redefining what constitutes a healthy partnership (Risman 2018). Commitment and relationship satisfaction exist in consensual non-monogamous, cohabiting, and living apart together romantic partnerships as well (Anapol 2012; Chaney 2014; Janning et al. 2018; Smith 2017). Although it is the norm for a romantic relationship to be defined as a monogamous, twenty percent of the participants in this study reported believing relationships did not have to be monogamous to be a committed and successful relationship. With societal norms such as cohabiting, consensual non-monogamy, and long-distance partnership being more common, new research is essential to determining how millennials define healthy relationships. Research on understudied healthy African American romantic relationships specifically will provide more in-depth analysis of flexibility and negotiations in dating. This research seeks to understand how millennial African Americans experience, understand, and sustain healthy romantic relationships at all stages of partnership before or in lieu of marriage.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research used in-depth interviews, and sought to answer the following questions: (1) how do African Americans understand healthy relationships?; (2) how does gender shape those ideas?; (3) how are ideas about healthy relationships informed by the culture, values, customs, and socialization practices within African American communities?; and (4) how are these ideas shaped by structural racism? I add to existing literature by analyzing the underexplored perceptions of the dating stages from African Americans directly. My research explores the ambiguities that different-sex African American couples experience when navigating their preconceived notions of gender expectations within their relationship. I ultimately aim to discover how participants develop relationship beliefs, create and sustain gender, and deal with societal relationship strain.

Sampling

I interviewed ten African American men and women (in total) who have been in a different-sex romantic relationship for at least six months. The six-month duration is crucial to understanding the perceptions of committed verses casual romantic relationships. Three months is usually the beginning period of what most identify as serious relationships (Lewin 2017). Serious commitment will best gauge the accuracy of respondents' responses since they have more involvement with their partner. In order to study commitment patterns within those relationships, serious relationships were defined as lasting at least six months. African Americans who were currently in a relationship but were not together longer than three months, were excluded. However, African Americans who were not currently coupled but have been previously were included in the study, as relationship attitudes persist even in the absence of one.

Since focused on millennials, the age of my interviewees were between 23 to 39 years-old (Dimock 2019). There were a total of six women and four men. The educational level ranged from an associate degree to a PhD. Interviewees held jobs in marketing, customer service, academia, and human services. The longest relationship scaled from one year to ten years.

This group is at the prime years of partner and marriage selection. Lastly, those I interviewed identified as being in or have been in a serious or committed relationship. Committed relationships were defined to include deepening of attachment over time, commitment, and physical attraction (Lewin 2017). It is important to note, monogamy is not the only model of commitment (Anapol 2012; Smith 2017). Committed relationships are bound by rules and expectations established by partners which is also present in consensual non-monogamy (Smith 2017). For the purpose of this study those who identified as predominantly having different sex relationships irrespective of their heterosexual categorization were included in this study.

 I am interested in gendered racial power dynamics that mainly plays out in male-female relationships. For the purposes of this research, African Americans were those who identified as African-descent or Black and whose family has been in the U.S. for at least three generations. My greater research goal is to look at the coping effects and meaning-making of healthy relationships despite generational trauma that ensued from past and current racial oppression in the U.S. (Alexander 2010; Burton, Bonilla-Silva, Ray, Buckelew & Freeman. 2010; DeGruy 2005). Due to cultural and marital belief differences amongst the varying ethnicities that may be categorized as Black, I focused on the group that was able to reflect more on their American culture and experiences and not from their ancestral land. I assumed all interviewees knew if their parents and grandparents were born in the United States. Therefore, the sampling method I used was purposive sampling. I accessed a population in which their relevance to the research

topic was more important than their statistical representativeness of the greater population. My sample size was solely based on individuals that fit the above criteria.

I accessed this sample of respondents from eligible participants at Minnesota State University Mankato, the greater Minnesota area, and the United States at large. I used social media and posted my flyer on student organizations' Facebook pages, like Students United's, as the main method to access sample respondents. Posting flyers around the campus and Minneapolis/St. Paul metro community was the next step. I arranged with professors to do recruitment participation during their class times and left flyers for interested people. Potential conflicts of interests were with students that I taught as a graduate assistant. For this reason, I recruited in junior, senior, and graduate courses outside of the department of sociology. To further recruit respondents, I tabled in the Centennial Student Union at a pre-approved table that visibly displayed my flyer (see Appendix A). When an interested person walked up, I went over the flyer with them. Common areas and specific multicultural events were the most likely places for African Americans to be exposed to my research study. However, to minimize selection bias, I recruited at broader community events and social media pages. When students indicated by email or in person that they would like to participate in my study, I had them sign up for an interview time and date.

Data Collection and Analysis

I used an audio recorder to capture each interview. Once it was established that the person identified as at least a third generation African American born, primarily dates different-sex, and was at minimum in a serious romantic relationship for six months, the interview process began. Respondents answered demographic questions following each interview. The demographics I inquired about were age, job description (excluding student), gender, age, educational level, and

longest relationship duration. Each interview lasted 30-60 minutes. I used a list of pre-determined open-ended questions (see Appendix B). Lastly, I started each session with snacks to set a welcoming atmosphere.

There was a possibility that some respondents were uncomfortable when discussing some of the topics within this interview. To minimize their discomfort, I reminded participants that they can end the interview at any time and skip any question they wish. The setting was within the Sociology and Corrections Department office and library conference room. I chose this setting because conference rooms are formal but private which lessened the likelihood of external distractions. With that in mind, I chose the setting only if my participants chose not to pick the most comfortable meeting place for themselves. In addition, I conducted phone interviews in lieu of in person meetings. Allowing participants to choose the location provided a more peaceful state of mind, which in turn lead to more substantial data.

In compliance with IRB standards, informed consent took place at the beginning of the interview (see Appendix C). As indicated on the form, the location of the discussion recordings and who else viewed my research was available for participants. All names and identifiers in the transcripts were replaced with pseudonyms or blanked out. Audio recordings were stored on the university computer of my faculty advisor and on a password locked thumb drive. All audio recordings were destroyed once transcripts were completed. I stored the hard copies of participant consent forms in a locked filing cabinet in my advisors' University office. Participant consent forms will be destroyed after three years.

The data from the transcripts of the interviews were analyzed as they were collected using grounded theory. Grounded theory, introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967), is an inductive method of analysis that allows the data from interviews or observations to be compared as it is

collected (Browne 2014; Charmaz 2014). This theory develops emerging ideas by identifying recurring themes. Grounded theory is most used to avoid preconceived ideas and to explore what each participant is trying to convey and actively extract themes of the data. (Browne 2014).

The first step in this approach was data collection. As stated previously, I audio recorded in-depth interviews. As the data were collected, I coded the transcribed information, initially using line-by-line coding. Following Charmaz's (2014) format for qualitative coding, I next categorized my data with a brief name to group together similar perceptions using NVivo. Next, I used a memo to categorize responses of those I interviewed, into shared themes or identified patterns. Lastly, I analyzed data by finding connections once each interview was coded. The most significant codes became notes about my thoughts, comparisons, and connections about the data (Charmaz 2014). In addition, emergent themes identified in earlier interviews were used to create new questions for remaining ones. This process allows other researchers to compare and create new theories on understanding African American romantic relationships.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

According to the participants I interviewed, healthy relationships are highly individualized. I organized the findings of this study following the key areas that focused on the key areas of individualization theory: (1) respondents' thoughts of healthy selves; (2) relationship flexibility and rejecting societal expectations and norms; (3) and communication. However, one overarching theme presented itself when looking at the entire study: challenges to African American romantic relationships. Therefore, challenges to dating will be presented as the fourth theme of this study. The unique challenges of being a millennial, being African American, and living in the United States impact respondents' perceptions of healthy romantic relationships. Participants expressed the challenge of keeping themselves healthy first, in spite of gendered racism which poses the biggest threat to relationship maintenance. This theme is reflected throughout the other key findings.

As expected, African American millennials more commonly have individualized ways to recognize and experience romantic relationships (Amato 2012; Cherlin 2009, 2020; Giddens 1992; Risman 2018). However, self-development, viewed as a necessary step of having a healthy relationship, was also a means to achieve relationship success. Those I interviewed felt partnership was just as valued as self-development in a relationship. Moreover, improving self was a means to acquire and maintain mutual growth and satisfaction throughout the relationship. Although the emphasis on couple oriented or egalitarian partnerships differs from the individualization theory, emphasis on personal growth and flexibility to achieve their desired relationships fit the individualization theory model (Cherlin 2004; 2020).

Healthy Selves

The belief that in order to have healthy relationships, they must be healthy as individuals, was prevalent amongst all those I interviewed. Most participants perceived healthy selves to be a state of wholeness. Where one's emotional, mental, and physical well-being are constantly checked. Participants identify two aspects of this healthy state of being in a romantic relationship: (1) Healthy selves, or having full awareness of who you are, your generational baggage, and other influences you have that impact the relationship; (2) relationship flexibility or openness to your own and partner's healing. Some of the participants expressed going on a journey to find themselves and discover who they are and what they like in between or in anticipation of future relationships. One man, Jabari, reflected on a past relationship that failed because he didn't take this needed time for himself:

> . . . and that's where it goes back to having that relationship with God; it's imperative because if you don't know who you are, because at that time I would struggle with my identity, if you all are not healthy mentally, and you don't have those standards, those morals, those principles, and you don't stand your ground and set your expectations up front, relationship will set it for you.

For Jabari, developing a healthy self is fundamental to having a healthy relationship. Moreover, a relationship cannot grow or be hindered without this foundation. Additionally, many of the participants in the study indicated that many of their current relationship woes came from unresolved trauma caused by their family of origin. Tiffany discussed how being purposeful with self-development, after leaving what she called, a "disastrous", marriage extended to those areas:

> . . . I was intentional about healing. I was intentional about getting to know who I
> am outside of a marriage, outside of a family. More intentional about why I stayed
> in it for so long and how I was susceptible to even getting into an abusive
> relationship. So, it made me more reflective. It made me actually deal with
> unresolved family hurts and wounds and childhood hurts – and to circumvent
> repeating that same behavior and entertaining those same kinds of guys. So, I
> think that has been the biggest benefit, because it makes me more intentional
> about what I want in a relationship, what I'm willing to deal with, and what I'm
> not willing to deal with.

Tiffany highlights the importance of reflecting after an unhealthy relationship in order to be a

healthier version of yourself for the next. Further, she acknowledges the similar threads she sees

in her choice of partners to those of partners her mother chose when Tiffany was growing up.

Tiffany and others discussed how this contributed to equipping themselves with the mental

health tools necessary to engage in a healthy way, let alone a healthy relationship. Tiffany goes

on:

> . . . I even have known people who have said they got not even premarital, but
> pre-engagement counseling. And I think that's very healthy for that person that
> got that counseling, because they knew they came from a jacked-up family –
> dysfunctional family – and that other person came from a dysfunctional family.
> So, it's like, we about to get into some counseling. And she said she felt like that
> greatly helped their relationship, because it's like we both know we came from
> dysfunction. So, let's do everything in our power that we can to make sure that
> this is healthy as we go into this with clear expectations on what's going on. Yeah,
> so I feel that's essential.

Tiffany's emphasis on the health of the relationship is different from Jabari, as it involves her

partner in that healing space as the relationship progresses. Lola held off of sex with her partner

to celebrate her celibacy as a part of self-love and trying something different in this relationship.

Of those I interviewed, most alluded to having both your own healing foundation and a shared

healing dynamic with your partner. Other respondents also observed how needing to be aware of

your mental health and the other person is vital. The health of the relationship was hindered by

similar cycle of norms in their families of origin and the larger black community. When Lola

acknowledged mental health is important for how to cope and learn skills to be with your

partner, she stated the necessity of having a therapist assistance. "We had to do that with a

therapist. We didn't know those skills. We hadn't seen it modeled. I had never seen it modeled,

and he sure as hell hasn't either."

Lola who is in an interracial relationship with a white man highlights how both of them did not

have mental awareness as part of their upbringing. Daniel also touched on the importance of mental

health practices for himself within a romantic relationship, stating:

> I'm learning that it is very important. I didn't think it was important until I got in
> one [relationship]. After that I felt it was important to be aware of your mental
> health, but I didn't realize how important it was or how valuable therapy could be.
> I personally haven't gotten in therapy yet, but I plan [to] because I'm realizing that
> there are things that I need to work out as a human and also to be a better for
> somebody else. And I think a lot of us do realize that.

Daniel goes on to explain the dynamics of why he didn't realize the importance of therapy before:

> That's another narrative is slowly shifting but I think that the narrative is still
> therapy is for white people. That's all I would hear. It's not for us. You're black.
> You don't need therapy. You can just pray or you need to get over it, man up, you
> know.

Daniel's account captures the intersections of race and gender expectations on his "on again" relationship. Similar to Daniel, Jasmine suggests how the influence of mental health stigma within the black community can play out for a relationship's detriment:

> . . . everyone brings baggage into relationships. Whether you've dated people or not, you bring life baggage and a lot of people think their life baggage should be resolved and solved by their partner. And it's like no, you need to work on that shit yourself. Like he has his own baggage too. It's not his responsibility to work on your trusting issues or your anxiety or your control issues. That's not on him. That's on you. So, I do think that mental illness plays a huge factor and I also think because the black community doesn't want to acknowledge it, we don't want to talk about it, we don't realize how much we project that into the relationship. I've met a lot of people who have anxiety and so their way of projecting it into a relationship is they try to control their spouse.

Jasmine, who has been with her partner for ten years, believes acknowledging what mental triggers you have and taking ownership to growth in those areas, is an important dynamic of a healthy romantic relationship. The perspectives provided, shed light on how developing a healthy partnership can stem from experiences and be very generational. These trends were common throughout the study with some variance in thoughts of what constituted ideal relationship negotiations.

Rejecting Societal Expectations and Norms

The second part of experiencing a healthy romantic relationship is the ability to be flexible with your partner. That is, most participants indicated they don't believe in pre-determined roles but instead believe that couples should work out arrangements for themselves based on their own preferences and life circumstances. All participants discussed reevaluating or

checking in with your partner during different stages of the relationship. When reflecting on the

importance of emotional availability as a part of a healthy relationship dynamic, Jasmine said:

> Yeah. Again, I think it's emotionally available based on what the two partners agree upon. I'm a huge proponent of people should be who they are, and they should express themselves how they want to express themselves and that looks different for every relationship. So maybe early on in the relationship you may not need to be that emotionally available because you've only known the person for a short period of time and I don't think it's healthy for you to be so vulnerable and put your whole self out there but I think maybe as the relationship grows and develops you establish what level of intimacy needs to be there from an emotional standpoint. I mean you agree upon that.

Jasmine attributed this process of adjusting to having realistic relationship expectations. A part of

what makes a healthy relationship for her is knowing when to be vulnerable, understanding there

isn't an ideal relationship model, and having a mutual understanding. Erica, who cohabits with

her boyfriend, recalls if they both kept the same mindset from their early 20s there would be a

completely different relationship outcome. However, this relationship shift came from lack of

being on the same page or having an inflexible partner. Erica described her relationship as one

that was previously unhealthy due to physical altercations. This same relationship is now the

healthiest she has been in because of the growth and progression. Erica further suggests major

life moments rather than agreed upon expectations was the catalyst for turning this relationship

healthy:

> Honestly, I'm going to be real. His auntie passed away maybe like a month after we graduated. She was just at graduation, but everybody knew she was in her last stage of cancer. So, when she transitioned over, I wasn't there for him and I purposely did that, not to disregard his auntie's life but just to disregard his feelings like he did to me many times before in the past. And when you do that, I don't care how

much money you got, how much accolades you have but death that's one thing that puts us all at the same level, but when you disregard life it's kind of like oh, they're serious. This is for real.

When speaking of this incident, it appeared Erica found her dismissal of her partner's grief as a one of last resort and recognized that it was not acceptable to maintaining a healthy relationship. Although relationship flexibility was pivotal for the relationship, other participants like Michael recalled this can be a strain during different times in the relationship:

> I think in my relationship that's been where a lot of the conflict doesn't get resolved is by having static ideas about what should be, as opposed to accepting what is, And so when [flexibility and negotiation] doesn't happen, and either of us are still looking at it through the same lens.. then things don't go anywhere. You have this arrested development without that redefining or reframing… If there's one major challenge, then part of overcoming that challenge would be this redefining and reframing. And so, if that part's not there, then in my mind then whatever the other challenge is can't necessarily be fully addressed.

Michael provides insight on how flexibility is a foundational part of a relationship that is a needed tool in overcoming every relationship problem. However, Michael discusses how getting to the pivotal space of being flexible with your partner is a hurdle in and of itself. Redefining was one way participants explained prioritizing maintenance and negotiation of roles. This reframing of relationship expectations was dependent on who was most suitable for different task like managing money or staying at home during a given time. When explaining why gender scripts are not necessary for a healthy relationship Matthew asserted:

> We're [not] living in this 1900s dynamic where the man has to do this, the man got to be the head of the household, the man has to supply – or the woman stays and cooks, nurtures the children. And then one thing we got to come to understand, it's

> like a different time. Women don't want to do that. Men don't want to do that either. Not saying that's how I think about it, because like in a sense, I don't mind providing. However, I know she's not going to want to stay home and do that. And I'm not forcing the issue on her because like, I want her to achieve her, I want her to achieve her dreams too. Like, I don't want to place any type of limitation on nobody. So yeah, I do think societal demands come into the role. People expect you to do this, perform a certain way when it comes to the patriarchy of the household. Whatever. It's a different time.

Matthew's perspective shows his hopes for moving away from men as head of household and forcing his partner into societal expectation exemplifies the level of boundaries he expects to have with his partner. However, Matthew understands that the provider and homemaker role were once valid for different generations of romantic partners. There is something to be said about how he emphasized men and women no longer want to fit these norms. His comment about not wanting to limit his partner says a lot about his awareness of patriarchy hindering women's achievements outside the household. Additionally, Matthew's statements demonstrate how individual goals and achievements come first, and that means negotiating flexible roles so both can achieve their goals. Another participant, Keisha, recollects having to establish boundaries with her partner of a different nationality:

> . . . My husband is Indian. And so, they are a very traditional culture. They have very traditional gender roles. So, my mother-in-law still cooks for an entire family. She cleans, she doesn't work at all. And then my sister-in-law works as well, which is like mind-blowing, I guess, for that society. And then she comes home, she takes care of her child, and then she like feeds the whole family and then she does it all over again. She still has responsibility and chores. And her husband kind of sits around and doesn't do anything. Like ever. And so, it's one of those things where I see that dynamic and I'm a very clear with my husband, that that's not what we're going to be doing.

Keisha's account reiterates the romanticized ideas about how women should balance home and/or careers a theme dominate in different-sex relationships that Matthew expressed. What I found

interesting was the feelings she had about men in the provider role, "I'm never going to be mad at a man who wants to spend their money instead of my own money… It's not even that the man should spend the money. I just don't like spending my own money." It is important to note, although participants perceived themselves to be flexible, most adhered to some form of expected gender norms. When asked about who pays for outings or date Daniel said:

> . . . I would say it's expected that the man is to do it, paying for the first few dates but after a certain point and the point varies. It depends on, I guess, how much she may like you and the potential she may see in you but after a certain point she'll offer to pay or offer to drive.

As indicated above, a few of these norms were men traditionally leading or initiating financial responsibility in the relationship until the relationship progressed. Most of the women I interviewed participants recalled varying instances on expecting men to pay for initial dates. As Lola reminisced of earlier dates with her partner:

> He did [pay], until later on. Then it became me. We started splitting once it got more serious. The majority was him paying at first, and then we started splitting it. Or I would pay. It was kind of split down the middle sometimes. Or we went Dutch, because it was expensive, man . . . I actually initiated it. I was like, you know what? I got this one. I can grab this one. He said, "Oh, really?" I'm like, "Yeah, I can pay for this." So, I went to a place that I knew I could afford, because I was so broke back then.

Most of the participants discussed not wanting to put a burden on their partner with societal expectations. The more serious the relationship progressed the more gender norms were loosely followed. Moreover, participants became more flexible with their partners the longer the duration

of the relationship. Most participants suggested relationship roles are healthy when you both agree and it's compatible.

Communication

Participants understood healthy relationships as one built on trust and communication. Communication was the lens through which awareness, intimacy, problem resolution, and flexibility were possible. Revisiting topics or switching up routines was deemed the essential core of healthy relationships. For some participants, this open communication extended to texting and social media. Lola goes into specific details on how full disclosure is an important part of what she considers a healthy relationship:

> While we were dating. . .he was just available, also, and he made me feel secure. I don't know what he did or how he did it, but he made me feel secure. If I had a question, or if I was upset, or if I called, he answered the phone. Or if he didn't, he had a reason why that was legit.

Transparency, constant reassurance, and availability were all necessary components Lola equated with healthy intimate relationships. Lola acknowledged that her beliefs stem from the lack of fidelity in her environments. "So, I come from a relationship, or a background, where everyone cheats on everybody. So, it's a very big thing for me to have a monogamous relationship and one that I feel secure and trust in." Lola's awareness of her trust issues, partially stemming from her experiences with infidelity, reiterates earlier discussions of recognizing relationship baggage. Some participants spoke about being flexible with your partner's insecurities and shortcomings was monumental to the relationship's growth.

Trust was best demonstrated in the expectation's participants had with their current or future partners. Daniel vocalized his concerns of having a partner that understand differences between genders. "Well, also it's very important. I would say emotional patience. We as men are not going to open up quite like that. Despite the narrative shift it still takes us a while to be vulnerable and feel as though we won't be judged or looked at differently if we tell you how we feel." Daniel's response considers the different socialization men may experience with communicating. Building vulnerability and intimacy was an unspoken theme amongst participants. More importantly, trust in themselves to show up as this independent individual with the greater goals of having an interdependent partnership. Matthew, in a long-distance college relationship, articulates the significance of consulting your partner on the mundane things:

> . . . usually when I make a decision, I run it by her first. But it's like, it's vice versa. You know? If I'm going to do something, if I have this opportunity to do something, I'm going to ask her, do you think this is smart? If I have this economic activity, like an opportunity to like, buy something, like say I'm going to go buy a shirt or something, I send her a picture and be like, hey, you think would look good on me? Or something like that . . . Or even if I'm just going to invest some money or something, like I should pay this bill first and I'm like...If I need any type of an insight, I probably run it by her.

Matthew's perspective of a communal, or couple-oriented being a part of a healthy relationship dynamic is the opposite of the individualization theory. Other respondents mentioned being individualized in some ways and couple-oriented in others. Similar to Matthew, Jasmine stresses the significance of discussing different topics with your partner:

> But I think what happens so much is that people don't talk about it and they don't make any agreements and then people go into marriage with a lot of assumptions.

> So, then you get into situations where you're like oh, I thought I was going to be a stay-at-home mom. We never talked about that. I thought you were going to be working or like, I thought you were going to have five kids. No, I only want to have one kid. They're just some very basic conversations that people don't talk about when they get in these marriages or they get in these relationships and they have a lot of conflict.

Jasmine emphasizes the importance of communicating about a range of topics, from assumptions about housework and child-rearing. In this section I explained participants' emphasis on having healthy selves in order to build healthy relationships. Awareness of potential health triggers, past experiences, and current relationships coping mechanisms was the foundation of successful intimate relationships. Participants identified relationship flexibility as the mandatory glue that keeps the relationship progressing. Lastly, the people I interviewed discussed how important having prior conversations around relationship expectations is to help eliminate misguided assumptions and alleviate unnecessary relationship strain In the next section, I will show how, despite the best intentions to communicate and remain flexible, couples face challenges internal and external challenges that threaten their maintenance of a healthy relationship.

Challenges to Dating

All participants were African American. Each in their own way discussed how being black had a significant impact on their dating relationships. For some, stereotypes or mistreatment from their different sex counterparts were the norm. Jasmine remembers not thinking she would end up with her African American husband because of the previous ones she encountered:

> I've met quite a few African American men who would treat white women they've dated much nicer than black women they've dated, or they'd be okay knocking up black women and not marrying them but then they would want to be committed to

white women.

The two women who are in interracial relationships, discussed how growing up, black men didn't want to date them. However, both women have experienced external racism or conflict from being married to a man of a different race. Keisha recounts not fully being accepted into the family:

> I think though for my husband, it's a lot tougher, because in his society, interracial dating is not a thing that he'd do. So, like around the time when I was in India, I couldn't go out with him in certain places. . . The family came over, they couldn't see me. And things like that, that it made it a little bit harder for us to like, be together. So yeah, I think being in an interracial relationship is tough.
> I think family-wide, like if we took family out of the equation, then everything would be perfect.

Other participants mentioned a distrust in interracial relationships because of theirs or others' racist experiences. Three-fourths of the men I Interviewed said it was easier or their preference to date only black women. In response to why interracial dating wouldn't work for him Daniel states:

> It's very important, just like the little stuff and the big stuff. So certain Ebonics I might use, slang terms she just won't understand if she's not of that culture. She might look at me crazy if I say the 'n' word. I'm going to look at her like I'm going to say it and then just that feeling you get when you're with a black woman, that intangible feeling that she gives me. Like there are certain things I don't have to explain to her. I don't think every white person is so ignorant they don't understand what we go through but if I tell her - when I come home and tell her I got pulled over by the cops, she's not going - I'm going to have explain it. She's going to automatically be like, are you okay? . . . She might even automatically reach out and hug me if she understands that even though I made it home, I'm here, I may not be okay. So, I don't have to explain that kind of stuff to her.

Daniel highlights the need for a partner to have a shared understanding of his gendered racist experiences. Most respondents felt a shared experience or understanding of African American history is extremely important for a relationship, but full understanding only comes if both partners are African American. Moreover, half of the participants alluded or explicitly referred to feeling a loyalty to date only within their race. Tiffany expressed external pressure she experienced when venturing to date people of other races:

> I feel like black men can do whatever they want. They can date whoever they want. But when a black woman dates outside, especially a white man, it's like she sold out . . . I think throughout history, slavery times and – I think it dates back to that, too, and also black men just feeling like – or black people in general feeling sometimes like you should keep it within the race, like the strong black family or black love. It's just that…sometimes people's pride in wanting just to continue on building up healthy, black families and black households

Tiffany's account pinpoints the connection between her expected relationship choices, generational influences, and being a woman. Similar to Tiffany, Sierra expands on how institutional racism influenced her family's to distrust dating white people:

> Well, I feel like when an interracial couple is seen in public, or I have heard conversations through friends, family, and [others that] they wouldn't understand each other, or they couldn't understand each other's background. . . Like the enslavement of black people, the Jim Crow era of black people.

Sierra points to the importance of having a shared understanding of racial history and similar backgrounds for forming a close relationship. She goes on to explain, specifically, how her family

ingrained a distrust of white people that shaped her own views of interracial relationships:

> . . . my mother is from the Jim Crow era and my grandma is from sharecropping era, and my great grandma is from slavery era. So, my grandma doesn't trust any white person. So, for me to bring a white man home, my grandma would never approve of that. Only because of the era she grew up in. The Jim Crow era where my mom grew up, being my mother, where, you know, racism was heavily in Arkansas, where most of them are from, and they moved to Minnesota. They just have a different perspective on the white culture than what I have as a millennial.

Sierra's narrative reveals something that all those interviewed mentioned, as vital to healthy relationship: the ability to relate. In this research, interviewees expressed how important it is to partner with someone who can understand their experiences with race and racism. This goes back to the larger idea of being seen and understood as individuals and the unique identities that they come from.

All respondents were millennials. Every person interviewed explicitly or otherwise stated they did not learn or care to continue the relationship patterns of their parents/family of origin. This connection is important because it distinguishes the generational differences in dating. Some witnessed or continued patterns of toxicity, many discussed the effects of single parenting, mostly from moms which is a newer phenomenon. Daniel's biggest relationship goal perfectly sums up this experience:

> . . . I know a few people who are my age who are married but I want to break that curse of black men can't be family men, they can't be faithful, they can't be good fathers. I want to be the father that person never had. So, I just want to break a lot of generational curses and show the world what black men are capable of.

Daniel summarizes the intersectionality of his race and millennial status on his dating relationships. Like other interviewees, Daniel expressed a major goal of his is to normalize healthy African American relationships and destigmatize the stereotypical ideas of what black manhood looks like. Lastly, gendered nuances in the data summed up to women being ahead in emotional labor in relationships and enduring more, longer, or later in life unhealthy relationships. As discussed earlier, undoing mental health stigma and toxic masculinity in the form of shunning emotional availability in men is a modern dilemma. As Daniel explained, toxic African American masculinity stems from not showing vulnerability as a man:

> I would say it is. It's not an easy dynamic but definitely a needed one. I think for black men we've been conditioned since we were kids to not cry, to not show emotion. I think being more accepted, like I say for myself, and maybe a few others, is that we're still sometimes hesitant because even though we can be vulnerable, we don't want to be looked at as soft. So, we sometimes hold our emotions back even though we probably shouldn't. But there's still that stereotype well, if I tell her how I feel like too much or if I go too deep, then I'm soft . . . I think that's just been something embedded in the community got to be strong, can't show any emotion. You have to be the provider. You have to be the pillar of strength. So, you can't let anybody else see you weak because if you want her to see you be weak then she won't respect you. You know, if [you] show her anything more than some tough macho man, then you're not a man.

This highlights the strain that scripted gender norms such as provider can have on a relationship. Daniel's response of bottling in emotions and his partner creating an environment where he can open up mimics that of other participants. Sierra recalls similar conflicts she experienced with upholding gender norms:

. . . I've experienced to where the man feels like since I am a woman and I give birth, that I need to sit at home, or I feel like he – or he has expressed to me, or my partner at the time had expressed to me, like, oh, dinner should be ready when he gets home…after being in labor, after taking care of the baby, after my baby being premature or me sitting at the hospital all day, he says like, oh, you weren't doing anything all day. You were just sitting at the hospital. So, by the time I come home and I'm of work, [after giving birth] the house should be clean, or I should have food on the table. And it's like my body just experienced something traumatic. So, yeah, I definitely experienced [conflict with expected gender norms] that.

Like Sierra, the majority of those I interviewed revealed similar constraints when discussing the importance of emotional availability and realistic expectations as a means to a healthy romantic relationship. These are both relevant in the intersections of gender and race. Although participants may have felt bound by gender norms, most of them relied on these cultural guidelines in some form. A few participants mentioned the desire for a man to lead or a woman is better suited for domestic labor. In this chapter, I have described the four major aspects of African American relationships, including the importance of creating and maintaining healthy selves, relationship flexibility, and communication, in addition to the unique challenges African Americans face in romantic relationships. In the next section, I will focus on the implications of these findings.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Healthy can't come without healing first. The participants of this research perceived healthy relationships to be a journey of pursuing growth individually and collectively in the relationship for themselves. Moreover, breaking generational cycles within the African American community at large was an important aspect of healthy relationship-building for most I interviewed. Milestones like achieving generational wealth and education and being healthier versions of themselves, may take longer than their white counterparts who likely have more access to cultural and economic capital. Thus, why the percent of marriage considered a marker of relationship prestige remains low among educated African Americans (Cherlin 2020). Relationship success is important to African Americans, but without economic stability most think marriage or other dating relationships won't last (cf. Risman 2018; Stewart 2019). As millennials face more uncertain economic lives (Stewart 2019), it is unlikely that marriage will increase among millennial African Americans.

This research specifically aimed at millennials was most apparent in the flexibility and negotiation evident in young adult relationships rather than economic stability. Most respondents only mentioned financial independence or stability in relation to being flexible with your partner. For example, sharing the responsibility of paying for dates to reduce financial strain on one partner was the most identified way of being financially flexible. However, most relationships started or defaulted with the man paying for majority of dates. Without strong norms, when people have to negotiate arrangements for themselves, they usually end up falling back on old, highly gendered patterns (Eaton & Rose 2011; Lamont 2014). As mentioned before, men having to measure up to be the lead or initiator in a relationship was the most common thread of patriarch practices in relationships.

African Americans understand healthy relationships to be highly individualized. Individualized relationships put the individuals in them and their own well-being front and center ("Healthy Selves"), flexibility, and communication are the other two of the three major components of individualized marriages according to Cherlin (2004). Respondents in other dating stages fit this model as well. Interviewees choose a course of action, then reflected on the consequences of their actions and the actions of those around them and then chose further in a process known as relationship maintenance. This differs from individualization theory in the sense their partners input was required to determine initial and further action (Cherlin 2020). When one partner got too independent, they needed to regroup and remember they are a unit. Those I interviewed to varying extents agreed individual action of making decisions without communication was seen as unhealthy. Personal satisfaction and autonomy were prioritized with the greater goal of the relationship in mind versus autonomy and personal satisfaction for its own sake.

African American ideas about healthy relationships were most influenced by family of origin, societal stereotypes of black dating relationships, and patriarchy. Those I interviewed didn't go deeper into flexibility per se— rather, they emphasized rejecting societal expectations or what some see as outdated norms. All of the participants indicated they did not want to repeat or establish patterns held by their family of origin. Many experienced their first instance of healthy relationships from education, media, or couples outside of their community. The desire to disprove stereotypes of African American men being "unavailable" or African American women being "too strong" were dominant themes in the interviews. When asked about challenges to being an African American relationship, most agreed or contributed the above stereotypes stemmed from slavery and other forms of structural racism.

The findings seem to support the role of individual mental health and communication/negotiation patterns as a major predictor of relationship success. In this study, participants identified having access to mental health resources and healthy couple role models gave them hope to have more successful relationships. Future studies can look at the relationship between informal education with relationship success.

It was clear, the Afrocentric ideas of mutuality and reciprocity were important to those I interviewed (cf. Aborampah 1989; Perry 2013). Commitment matters but being able to be adaptative matters just as much. The legacy left from slavery coupled with being in the millennial generation may make African Americans more flexible rather than the theory of individualization. Many respondents understood relationship to be institutionalized just as much as it was individualized. Therefore, individualization theory may apply less to African Americans. The increased focus on bonds, partnership, and friendship are more similar to other relationship models than individualized theory.

Attempts at defining healthy relationships for African Americans, must come from within the African American community. As Collins (2000) has written, there is power within self-definitions. Furthermore, definitions and interpretations outside of a community can be detrimental and further perpetuate racial stereotypes, case in point, the "Moynihan Report" (Moynihan 1968). This controversial explanation of a white scholar ignoring his positionality, is a great example of the damage that occurs when applying Eurocentric definitions of what healthy African American life looks like. When examining the inequalities based on gender and race, many authors believe Afrocentric lens is necessary to undo Eurocentric placed constraints (Aborampah 1989; Bell et al. 1990). Therefore, it is essential for African Americans to conceptualize what is ideal romantic involvement for themselves. This research addressed the

ways that race and gender in the broader culture result in assumptions about roles and meanings for African American women and men in relationships.

A gap in the research was the role of religious community among non-married couples. In studies on married African American couples, religious communities had a big influence on those unions (Johnson & Loscocco 2015). In this research, the role of religion was a cultural schema that was still a determining factor of romantic relationships. Eighty percent of participants identified as Christian or having loosely Christian values. Some felt that their Christian views were more pivotal in determining their relationship choices and expectation than their racial views. Future research can examine if religious and other community influences are just as prevalent during the dating stages. Moreover, theories on generational migration within the U.S. and patterns of family stability could explain some of these themes.

A major theme that emerged in this study, was the role of sexual compatibility on the health of heterosexual romantic relationships. To some extent every person interviewed mentioned the importance of having shared values about sex or being on the same page. The frequency of sex shifted depending on how their partner views sex, what phase of the relationship the couple is in, and how it is initiated in the relationship. This would be a great area to expand on in further studies.

My findings contributed to shortening the gap between African American self-definitions and that of the larger Eurocentric culture. My research aimed to understand how African Americans perceive and experience healthy different sex relationships and continues the dialogue on building the community. Furthermore, this research gives a more comprehensive examination of romantic relationships in the United States, by adding this under researched perspective. The broader sociological point this study highlights is the need to conduct more

research from the perspective of those being studied. Moving away from using Eurocentric perspectives to explain most phenomena and assuming a stance of positionality are areas that can be examined on in more depth in the field of research.

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APPENDIX A: RESEARCH FLYER

Minnesota State Mankato
APPROVED

STUDY ON

African-American

ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

ELIGIBILITY TO PARTICIPATE:

BLACK/AFRICAN-AMERICAN ?

AND

HETEROSEXUAL ?

AND

IN A ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP (Past or Present) ?

Contact researcher if you answered **YES TO ALL** since you may be *eligible to participant*

No Longer than 90 MINS REQUIRED

There are no direct benefits to participants

WIN **$25** GIFT CARD

.

CONTACT:

EM: ALEXIS.JACKSON@MNSU.EDU

IRBNet Id #: 1519684

SCREENING QUESTIONS

1. Do you identify as Black or African American and your family has been in America for at least three generations?

2. Are you predominately in different sex relationships?

3. Have you currently been in a romantic relationship that has been at least three months; or, have you previously been in a romantic relationship for at least three months?

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE

These interview questions help address the research question of how Black or African American understand healthy relationships? How does gender shape these ideas? How does race shape these ideas?

15 Fixed Question-Open Response & Sub Questions
1. What is the longest relationship you have been in? Draw from that experience.
2. Do you think romantic relationships are overemphasized in our society? How so?
3. What does healthy romantic relationships look like to you?
    A. What about conflict, commitment/casual, communication, shared values, love, intimacy, fidelity, partnership & safety, respect someone to grow with
    B. What about being emotionally available/open/vulnerable? Is that a shared responsibility?
4. What does commitment mean to you? What makes you feel committed?
    A. What about love, physical appearance, honesty and friendship, personality and treatment, emotional and tangible support, sex
    B. What level of commitment are (were) you at, monogamous, marriage, LAT, cohabiting? Who initiated?
    C. How has long distance or text relationships shaped your cohabiting one?
5. Are you currently in a relationship?
    A. Tell me about it
    B. How long have you been it?
    C. Would you describe your relationship as a healthy one?
    D. What is something you do well as a couple?
    E. Is it a sexual one? Who initiated? Was sex apart of the healthy dynamic? Was the other person on the same page?
6. Have you been in an unhealthy relationship?
    A. What does that look like? How far did you guys commit, monogamy, marriage, LAT, cohabiting, engaged? Who initiated? Was the other person the same page?
    B. Was it a sexual one? Who initiated? Was sex a part of that unhealthy dynamic? Was the other person on the same page
    C. What have you seen as the consequences of that unhealthy relationship?
    D. How did that shape your perspective on relationships?
7. How do you and your (ex) partner make decisions?
    E. Who paid(s) for majority of dates(outings)? Who initiated? Was the other person on the same page?
    F. What's been the biggest challenge, source of conflict (What about gossip/reputation? What about mental or sexual games or rules? Trust Issues
    G. How has social media, texting not being present affected your relationship?
    H. How is (was) conflict resolved
8. Where does your ideas of healthy relationships come from?
    A. What about media, family dynamics, peers, community you grew up in.
    B. Are there any connections between media and reality?
    C. Platonic Friendships with the opposite sex.

    D. How does your religious identification shape your perspectives on romantic relationships; if at all?

9. What type(s) of relationship did you see modeled in your family of origin?
    A. What aspect do you desire vs don't like?
    B. Two parent household,
    C. Mental health awareness, practices
    D. Did you experience any rites of passage into adulthood, (birds & bees, debutante ball, baptism? fraternal/sorority legacy)

10. Based on your experience, do you think men and women have different ideas about what makes a relationship healthy?
    A. What does that role look like?
    B. How does that dynamic shape the opposite gender perspective
    C. Have you noticed any patterns?
    D. Has there been conflict related to ideas about gender?

11. Based on your experience do you think being an African American woman/man gives you different ideas about what makes a relationship healthy?
    A. What does that look like?
    B. What kinds of challenges, if any, do you experience being in a black relationship?
    C. Have you dated interracially if so, are these same challenges present?
    D. When do you first remember encountering this?
    E. What do you think of when you hear the term, "Black Love"? stereotypes?
    F. How important is having a shared understanding of African American history?

12. What is a goal you hope to accomplish in your romantic relationships?
    A. What are you doing to achieve that?

13. Is there anything about healthy relationships that we haven't discussed that's important?

14. Thank you for sharing now I am going to ask you some demographic questions.
    A. What type of job do you have?
    B. What is your age?
    C. What is your educational level?

APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

African Americans Perception, Understanding, and Experience of Healthy Romantic Relationships

You are invited to take part in research about millennial African American perceptions and ideals about intimate relationships**.** You are a potential participant because you have either been in a committed romantic relationship or are currently in one that is at least three months or longer, an American-born third generation and identify as heterosexual. The research is being conducted by Chelsea-Alexis Jackson under the guidance of Dr. Sarah Epplen. We ask that you read this form before agreeing to be in the research.

Researchers Affiliation

Minnesota State University, Mankato- Sociology and Corrections Department

Purpose

The purpose of the research is to understand the experiences and perceptions millennial heterosexual African Americans have about committed romantic relationships. Taking into consideration personal experiences, family and culture, this study seeks to understand what shapes perceptions and ideals about healthy intimate relationships.

Procedures

If you agree to be in this research, and sign this consent form, we ask that you participate in an in-depth interview, where you will be asked to answer several questions including history of romantic relationships, expectations and aspirations in romantic relationships, and experiences with your sexual involvement**.** Participation in this interview will take no longer than ninety minutes. This interview will be audio recorded.

Risks

There is a risk participant can be identified by their voice. Each recording will take place in a private conference room at the public library or a private location of your choosing. Recordings will be listened to in the privacy of my university office. There is the possibility that some respondents will be uncomfortable when discussing some of the topics within this interview. It is possible that you may be uncomfortable answering some questions. If this occurs, you may choose not to answer a question or end participation at any time with no negative consequences.

__ Initial to Confirm You Have Read Page

Confidentiality

For the purpose of confidentiality, all participants' and persons involved with the participants' names, identities and personal information will be changed in the final product of the study for the sake of confidentiality. Participants who withdraw before the final product will not have pseudonyms. Therefore, your information can be easily removed. To reduce the risk of being identified by name, I will store the hard copies of participant consent forms in a locked filing cabinet in my advisors', Sarah Epplen, University office. Participant consent forms will be destroyed after three years Audio recording will be used as a means of collecting data. The interviews will be done using audio recording and will be transcribed by Chelsea-Alexis Jackson.

Each recording will be downloaded onto a secure University computer and password locked thumb drive. Dr. Sarah Epplen and I, Chelsea-Alexis Jackson, will be the only ones to have access to your consent forms and audio recordings. Therefore, the information will be kept confidential. Listening to audio recordings and reviewing name identified transcripts will only be conducted in the privacy of the University office. All audio recordings will be destroyed once transcripts are completed. Additionally, names and locations mentioned during the interview will be changed or blanked out in the transcript and any publication to protect your identity.

Voluntary nature of study

Your decision whether or not to participate in this research will not affect your relationship with Minnesota State University, Mankato, and refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits. Even if you sign the consent form, you are free to skip any question and stop participation at any time. You do not need to complete participation if you feel uncomfortable doing so. At any time during the research process including the phone assessment you can state, "you are no longer interested in participating".

Benefits

There are no direct benefits to participants in this study. Additionally, this study will be relevant to society because it will become an outlet for future research in which it could be compared to similar studies on healthy relationship initiation, formation and duration within the African American community.

Compensation

Upon completion of interview your name will be entered in a drawing to win a $25 Visa Gift Card. If you win you will be contacted via e-mail after the completion of all interviews. The source of funding will come from the researcher Chelsea-Alexis Jackson

__ Initial to Confirm You Have Read Page

Contact

You can contact the researchers conducting this study: principle investigator Sarah Epplen at (507) 389-5669 and student researcher at alexis.jackson@mnsu.edu. If you have any questions or concerns regarding the treatment of human subjects, participants' rights and for research-related injuries contact: Minnesota State University Mankato Administrator of the Institutional Review Board, at (507) 389-1242.

Obtain Copy

Participants have a right to a copy of the consent form at any time you ask. If you decide you want a copy at a later time then signing, it may be obtained by contacting Sarah Epplen at Minnesota State University, Mankato Sociology and Corrections Department, (507) 389-5669.

I have read the above information. Participation in the research is voluntary. I may stop at any time. I consent to participate in the study.

__ I agree to be audio recorded during the interview session

If I choose not to be recorded, I am declining my participation in the study.

Age Requirement

__ I am at least 18 years of age

_____ Print Name

_____ Signature of participant

_____ Date

☐☐Participant received a copy.

MSU IRBNet Id number LOG # 1519684
Date of MSU IRB approval: February 12, 2020