AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP SOCIALIZATION AMONG BLACK COLLEGIATE WOMEN

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

Ahlishia J'Nae Shipley

The Graduate School
University of Kentucky
2011
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP SOCIALIZATION AMONG BLACK COLLEGIATE WOMEN

ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the College of Agriculture at the University of Kentucky

By
Ahlishia J’Nae Shipley
Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Ronald Werner-Wilson, Professor of Family Studies
Lexington, Kentucky

2011

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AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP SOCIALIZATION AMONG BLACK COLLEGIATE WOMEN

The pathways through which individuals learn to appraise and behave in intimate relationships greatly influence the quality and stability of their relationships. Research on intimate relationships among college students guided by a socialization framework focusing on learning and ways of viewing relationships is limited. The purpose of the present exploratory study was to examine the experiences and processes wherein young Black collegiate women learn to approach, maintain, and reflect on their intimate relationships. This topic is particularly salient to Black collegiate women who find themselves navigating unbalanced dating scenes and negotiating love relationships while balancing academic achievement and career aspirations. Ten Black, heterosexual women attending a four-year institution of higher education participated in three in-depth interviews where they shared life experiences which contributed to their understanding of intimate relationships. Using symbolic interactionism as a guiding framework allowed me to discover the multiple descriptions and meanings the participants assign to the interactions in their families, with their peers, and in their symbolic environments. The narratives shared by the women in this study revealed a number of experiences which prompted them to engage in self-reflection, critique, and learning with respect to self-identity and intimate relationships. Hearing messages, observing others, and experiencing relationships for themselves provided these women with a foundation for knowing the importance of preserving self-worth and self-identity, establishing expectations, and communicating thoughts and feelings. Implications for practice include the importance of developing specialized relationship education culturally and socially relevant to Black collegiate women, training campus professionals on the unique needs and concerns of this population, and educating parents on communicating with daughters about intimate relationship development. Future research should devote specific attention to social context, paternal-daughter relationship communication, and parental relationship modeling.
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP SOCIALIZATION
AMONG BLACK COLLEGIATE WOMEN

By

Ahlishia J’Nae Shipley

Dr. Ronald Werner-Wilson
Director of Dissertation

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May 6th, 2011
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Lexington, Kentucky

2011

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DEDICATION

somebody/anybody
sing a black girl’s song
bring her out
to know herself
to know you
but sing her rhythms
carin/ struggle/ hard times
sing her song of life

Excerpt – *For Colored Girls who have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf*
By Ntozake Shange

This dissertation is dedicated to my participants who have allowed me to sing
their songs to audiences that rarely have the opportunity to hear their voices.
Acknowledgments

Completing my dissertation was certainly a journey for me. However, I was not on this journey alone. The sense of accomplishment and success that I enjoy from completing my dissertation and my doctoral program I share with many significant individuals in my professional and personal life. I continually feel humbled by all the support I was blessed to have while I was finishing my program. God’s blessings in my life forever amaze me and I only hope I can give back all I have received.

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I want to acknowledge my participants for their willingness to share their stories with me about love and relationships. I am honored by the opportunity to translate their narratives and make them available to the academy. Without my participants, the completion of my dissertation would not be possible. I am grateful for their willingness to make the voices and experiences of young Black women more visible.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Where do individuals learn about love and intimacy? Through what experiences do they form the basis of their perceptions, motivations, and interactions in intimate relationships? Despite advances in research informing the public of the necessary elements of satisfying, healthy relationships, it is advantageous to explore the pathways through which individuals are socialized to approach intimate relationships. Various socializing experiences throughout the life course influence personal standpoint, and ultimately behavioral patterns in life. In the present exploratory study, I examined a specific dimension of socialization, intimate relationship socialization, among a sample of Black collegiate, heterosexual women. I define intimate relationship socialization as the processes and pathways through which knowledge, attitudes, values, and competencies related to intimate relationships are learned and ultimately carried out in behavior. The purpose of this research was to provide in-depth narratives on life experiences that influence the ways young Black women learn to think about and behave in intimate relationships.

Black women face unique circumstances when forming and maintaining intimate couple relationships (Tucker, 2003). Scholarship on the challenges these women face have highlighted the structural and cultural forces which influence relationship formation among this population. Because of an apparent retreat from marriage among Black women, several scholars have explored and theorized about the pathways and cognitions leading to relationship instability and volatility (Burton & Tucker, 2009; Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Pinderhughes, 2002; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995). In the context of the current research, little empirical work has been conducted on young, unmarried, upwardly
mobile Black women in college who have yet to form families. Additionally, little research on intimate relationships among college students has been guided by a socialization framework focusing on learning and ways of viewing relationships (Arnett, 2007). Although structural conditions are important to consider, more attention should be devoted to the channels through which Black women construct their definitions of healthy couple relationships and how these views are eventually applied to their experiences (Bynum, 2007). This topic of intimate relationship socialization is particularly salient given the current movement to promote healthy relationships and marriages.

Caveat

The present study focuses on Black women. Throughout this dissertation, both the terms Black and African American will be used to refer to the race of the population under study. The women in my study used both terms to describe themselves. On an informal level, many people I know use both terms to describe themselves as well. When reporting findings from the existing research, I will use the term that was used by the authors of the publications to describe their sample population.

Issue Statement

Several scholars have highlighted the challenges in the Black community with respect to relationship development (Aborampah, 1989; Burton, et al., 2009; Burton, & Tucker, 2009; Hill, 2005; hooks, 2001; Pinderhughes, 2002). hooks (2001) contends heterosexual relationships among Blacks are in a crisis. As she describes, “In real life most relationships between black (sic) males and females are not based on mutual respect and equality. Strife and conflict, secrets and betrayal constitute an ongoing pattern in many of these relationships…” (hooks, 2001, p. 180). She explains there are limited
models of Black couples in healthy relationships portrayed in various media outlets which points to the possibility that many Black people may be more comfortable, more familiar with consuming cultural products depicting dysfunctional relationships (hooks, 2001). The lack of healthy relationship models often places Black youth at a disadvantage in terms of learning the skill sets necessary to identify and form healthy, committed relationships for themselves (Fein, Burstein, Fein, & Lindberg, 2003). Understanding the experiences through which young Black people learn about relationships is an important element in continuing their successes as well as addressing the challenges they may face as they develop intimate connections with others.

As a segment of the Black population, young Black collegiate women face their own unique issues. Many of these young women must reconcile their personal goals with relationship desires, imbalanced sex ratios, and interpersonal gender challenges in the Black community. These issues have the ability to affect an individual’s views and behaviors in the context of intimate relationships. The purpose of the present exploratory study was to examine the experiences, contexts, processes wherein these women learn to approach, maintain, and reflect on their intimate relationships. My research was framed within an overarching research question: Through what pathways do young Black collegiate women construct their understanding of knowing and being in intimate relationships?

**Salience**

**Life course position.** Exploring and forming intimate relationships is a marker of young adulthood. Entering young adulthood is wrought with developmental tasks influenced by experiences in previous life course stages. In accordance with life course theory, successfully achieving these developmental tasks will predict transitions into
subsequent life stages (Elder, Crosnoe, & Johnson, 2003). Erikson (1963) characterized young adulthood as a struggle between achieving intimacy versus isolation. In contemporary society in the United States, this period of emerging adulthood between ages 18 to 25 is characterized by a focus on self-development, which is intended to lay the groundwork for adult lives (Arnett, 2007). Arnett (2007) offers specific features of emerging adulthood which are, “…the age of identity explorations, the age of instability, the self-focused age, the age of feeling in between, and the age of possibilities” (p. 208). This self-focused disposition prompts self-reflection and self-understanding, which influence an emerging adult’s personal approach to intimate relationship development.

Identity development is paramount to intimate relationship development because young adults must be aware of their personal needs and wants before they are able to articulate desired traits in a romantic partner. During this stage, young adults engage in socializing themselves by collecting data, so to speak, about what type of romantic partner they desire through courtship and dating practices. In a college setting, students have entrée to a rather large dating pool and they generally have the freedom to explore several possibilities without the traditional fidelity constraints of marriage. Because dating during this period is characterized by exploration, romantic relationships experience a great deal of volatility (Meier & Allen, 2008). Often, these relationships predict the quality of subsequent intimate relationships (Donnellan, Larsen-Rife, & Conger, 2005; Overbeek, Stattin, Vermulst, & Engels, 2007). Being unable to establish healthy, stable relationships can cause emotional and physical distress (Sbarra, 2006) and possibly disrupt successful transitions into future life course stages (Elder, Crosnoe, &
Johnson, 2003). The current research can inform educational programs focused on prevention and enrichment as they relate to intimate relationships.

**Structural conditions.** Among the emerging Black middle class situated across the country at colleges and universities, the number of Black female students exceeds their male counterparts. Black women also outpace Black men in college graduation rates (JBHE, 2006). The imbalance in educational attainment may influence mate selection among college-educated Black women, especially when attempting to adhere to the traditional rules of marriage in regard to propinquity and endogamy. Among low-income Black women in disadvantaged areas, there is qualitative evidence indicating some women feel compelled to tolerate infidelity and unhealthy relationships in order to keep a romantic male partner in their life largely due to the perceived limited availability of males in their communities (Lane et al., 2004). This could be true in a college campus context as well. In the Black population, gender ratios favor males thereby compromising the bargaining position of those females who desire to mate inside their race. Staples (1994) points out, “In a sense, black women often find themselves in the position of sexually auditioning for a meaningful relationship. After a number of tryouts, they may find a black male who is willing to make a commitment” (as quoted in Hill, 2005, p. 103). As a response to limited mate availability, many Black women may face permanent singlehood as a viable life option as well as choosing to expand their mate selection through age and race.

**Cultural context.** As noted before, there are several issues challenging the development of intimate love among Black people. In a broader context, the viability of the institution of marriage is seemingly challenged as the need for it has transformed.
Cherlin (2004) describes a shift in this country from a practical marriage to a companionate marriage, where emotional support and romantic love are favored over practical concerns. Since there are other widely accepted alternatives to marriage, such as prolonging singlehood and cohabitation, the institution of marriage, although it remains symbolic in our society, must be able to exist on its own merit (Cherlin, 2004). Hill (2004) discusses a nonmarriage ethos adopted by Black women due to perceived limited economic and gender privilege gained through marriage. She suggests that Black people attempt to adhere dominant ideologies of gendered marriage, but their economic realities make it difficult to fulfill such roles.

There are also features of campus culture that influence intimate relationship development. Although there is strong orientation to marriage at some point in the future among many young people in this country, survey research reveals an emergence of a low-commitment culture of casual dating and sexual involvement in young adulthood (Glenn & Marquardt, 2001; National Marriage Project, 2000). The act of hooking up and sex without strings is pervasive on college campuses despite the strong desire for marriage among college women (Bogle, 2008; Glenn & Marquardt, 2001). Although, many college women find casual sexual encounters desirable, a substantial number of women describe feeling awkward, disappointed, confused, empty, and exploited following these encounters (Glenn & Marquardt, 2001). Glenn and Marquardt (2001) found that Black and White female students often define the concept of hooking up differently, so it is important to understand these nuances when developing programming for targeted populations.
The Present Study

To address the research question: *Through what pathways do young Black collegiate women construct their understanding of knowing and being in intimate relationships?*, I employed a qualitative descriptive approach emphasizing the descriptions these women offer about their experiences (Sandelowski, 2000). The goal of fundamental qualitative description is to describe the experiences and perceptions of a phenomenon as it is understood and described by those who live it in their own language. In the present exploratory study, I described the learning experiences among a group of young Black women attending college who are in intimate relationships by discussing various elements of intimate relationship socialization. I conducted three semi-structured interviews with ten women from this population.

**Study rationale.** The present study explored pathways through which Black college women learn to appraise and operate in intimate relationship by discussing family of origin experiences, past and current relationships histories, and the meanings they ascribe to their experiences. It is important to study this population and research question for several reasons. First, although the percentage of Black female undergraduate enrollment has increased over the last 35 years and 37 percent of Black females 18-24 are enrolled in college, graduate or professional school (Mather & Adams, 2007; NCES, 2007), very few studies have been conducted focusing on the intimate relationship experiences of Black college women (Few, 1999). Several studies on this population have examined sexual risk behaviors, body image, dating violence, racial identity, and academic success (Amar, 2006; Amar & Alexy, 2005; Bond & Cash, 1992; Falconer & Neville, 2000; Foreman, 2003; Lewis, Melton, Succop, & Rosenthal, 2000; Schwartz & Washington, 2000). Research on the intimate relationship development of Black
collegiate women could inform and improve campus services available to them and provide directions for future research.

Additionally, given the current movement to promote healthy relationships and marriage, research highlighting the subjective experiences of young, unmarried, nulliparous Black women attending college through qualitative modes of inquiry has been slow to emerge. Few studies have focused specifically on the pathways through which young Black women have learned to approach intimate relationships. Exploring the development of these constructions is vital to understanding perceptions and behaviors among this population. Qualitative research is needed to offer a rich, dynamic description of their experiences. There are virtually no qualitative studies exploring the influence of family-of-origin, social networks, and values on the attitudinal and behavioral processes of Black collegiate women in intimate relationships.

In the recent literature, ethnographic studies on the relationship experiences of young, single mothers living in disadvantaged areas focus on the role of trust within a relationship context as well as pathways to family formation (Burton et al., 2009; Edin & Kefalas, 2005). These studies include substantial proportions of Black women as participants. If a large share of the qualitative research on Black women is found within the body research on poor single mothers living in disadvantaged areas, it is possible the narratives of these women will be reified as true among the Black female population in general. Bynum (2007) suggests the inclusion of research on emerging middle class Black women to add to the research on Black women in general. Expanding the demographic and contextual scope in our exploration of intimate relationships among this population will only help to serve all Black women.
Developing attitudes and behavioral patterns related to intimate relationships has implications for the physical and mental health of young Black women as well. Dating abuse (Amar & Alexy, 2005), adverse mental health outcomes (Amar, 2006; Boyd-Franklin, 1989), and sexual risk behavior (Foreman, 2003) are all common issues young Black women often face in the context of intimate relationship development. After being victimized in a dating situation, college women described experiencing distrust, feelings of disconnectedness, personal inadequacy, self-denial, isolation, and major life disruptions (Amar & Alexy, 2005). Dating violence can create emotional constraints which can often challenge the identification and formation of healthy relationships. The young Black female population is also at high risk for contracting HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases (CDC, 2010a; CDC, 2010b). Sexual risk behavior among Black women is sometimes mediated by their perceptions of their intimate partners (Foreman, 2003).

Issues of mental health are particularly ostensible for Black women of all ages. Black women seek mental health care services at lower rates than White females (Alvidrez, 1999). Mental health issues among Black women may go undertreated or underrepresented due to cultural issues related to defining mental illness. From an issue standpoint, Boyd-Franklin (1989) cites common issues that emerge in group therapy among Black women including: a general pessimism about intimate relationships; a diminishing pool of marriageable mates and its impact on family formation; and the impact of unresolved issues in past relationships on current relationships, which all collectively compromise relationship formation and maintenance among this population.
Lastly, the existing conceptual frameworks for healthy relationship development are largely based on empirical studies using samples comprised largely of middle class, White couples (Alder-Baeder, Higginbotham, & Lamke, 2004). It is possible that relationship education programming based on these existing frameworks could be more effective if the content and learning exercises reflected the experiences and voices of targeted populations.

Outline

In the next chapter, I will present the literature informing the current research, which will be divided into the following sections: intimate relationship socialization in the family, intimate relationship socialization in past relationship experiences and the theoretical standpoint that guided this study. In Chapter Three, I will provide a description of the qualitative research methods carried out in this study. Chapter Four is dedicated to reporting the results of the research study. In the final chapter, I will integrate findings from the current study with theory and the literature and discuss implications for the present research by offering recommendations for future research and applied work.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

The purpose of the present study was to describe the pathways through which young Black collegiate women construct their understanding of knowing and being in intimate couple relationships. This chapter will offer a review of the literature related to this inquiry and conclude with a section in which I describe the theoretical standpoint guiding the study.

Socialization during Emerging Adulthood

Grusec (2002) offers three major outcomes of socialization: (1) the development of self-regulation of emotion, thinking, and behavior; (2) the acquisition of a culture’s standards, attitudes, and values, including a willingness to accept the authority of others; and (3) the development of role-taking skills, strategies for resolving conflicts, and ways of viewing relationships. Several forces contribute to these socialization outcomes, including family, peers, and media. Although researchers tend to focus their efforts on socialization in childhood and adolescence, Arnett (2007) proposes socialization continues into emerging adulthood. Arnett (2007) argues that individuals can also participate in their own socialization, especially during emerging adulthood. Socialization does not conclude at the end of adolescence, but rather continues to develop during emerging adulthood. During this phase of the life course, individuals serve as agents in their own socialization as they interact with their environments and process information. Although this self-socialization does occur during childhood and adolescence, the process of self-socialization is more prominent during emerging adulthood as individuals gain more independence and freedom from the family unit (Arnett, 2007). Heinz (2002) offers two main features of self-socialization:
1) Individuals construct their own life course by attempting to come to terms with opportunities and constraints concerning transition pathways and life stages. 2) Individuals select pathways, act and appraise the consequences of their actions in terms of their self-identify in reference to social contexts which are embedded in institutions and markets (p. 58).

The idea of self-socialization with respect to intimate relationships among young adults is rarely explored in the literature (Arnett, 2007). Both socialization in the general sense and self-socialization are salient processes to consider in the context of intimate relationship development among young adults.

**Intimate Relationship Socialization in the Family**

Understanding intimate relationship processes is often approached through a developmental perspective in the empirical literature. There is a considerable amount of research highlighting the association between interactions with parents and psychosocial development in emerging adulthood. Parental socialization is directly related to the three socialization outcomes mentioned above (Arnett, 2007). Research germane to the current research question focuses on the link between parenting and emerging adults’ capacity to maintain intimate relationships with other individuals as well as their responses to parental conflict. It is widely established that family of origin dynamics provide the foundation for healthy or unhealthy relationship development in adulthood by providing an influential model for interactions in intimate relationships (Gottman, 1998; Holman & Birch, 2001; Peterson & Hann, 1999; Whitton, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2008a). Holman and Associates (2001) point out among all premarital predictors of relationship quality, family of origin variables are the most significant.

The lessons individuals learn during their formative years about love, commitment, and relationship maintenance exert influence in their intimate relationships later in life. When speaking about childhood lessons in love, hooks (2000) contends, “We
learn about love in childhood. Whether our homes are happy or troubled, our families
functional or dysfunctional, it’s the original school of love” (p. 17). Within the family of
origin, individuals observe their first models of intimate, love relationships. People learn
about the markers of healthy relationships, such as love, honesty, respect, and
communication or the lack of these markers from witnessing or being a part of family
interactions. It is through exploring these early interpersonal patterns acquired in the
family unit that researchers have worked to establish linkages to intimate adult
relationship formation and success. In applied work, practitioners can highlight this
connection between family of origin experiences and relationship competence to develop
and refine programs designed to promote healthy relationship development (Halford,
Sanders, & Behrens, 2001).

Despite emphasis placed on marital functioning in a developmental context,
several studies have surfaced focusing on the stability and quality of unmarried
individuals and couples as well, especially those in emerging adulthood. The reasoning
behind this expansion is that all couples do not eventually marry and also all married
couples were once in premarital relationships. This indicates a developmental process in
relationship formation (Bryant & Conger, 2002). I discuss studies primarily focusing on
young adults and young adult dating couples because my sample included young women
in dating situations. To gain a comprehensive understanding of cognitions toward
intimate relationships and the interactions therein, premarital developmental processes
contribute to relationship socialization should be considered (Bryant & Conger, 2002).
Trends in the literature indicate a focus on family-of-origin experiences as significant
channels through which subsequent intimate adult relationships can be understood.
Several studies have specifically included family of origin characteristics into their intergenerational transmission models (Bryant & Conger, 2002; Busby, Dean, Gardner, 2005; Holman & Associates, 2001).

**Intergenerational transmission models.** Many studies reveal family of origin experiences are significantly correlated with the manner in which adult children carry out core components of healthy intimate relationships, such as commitment and conflict management as well as their relationship attitudes. Bryant and Conger (2002) created an intergenerational conceptual model of intimate relationship development among young adults. The researchers tested the influence of experiences in the family of origin on characteristics of the adult child couple relationship. This model is distinct from previous family-focused socialization models because it tested specific relationship competencies based on family variables. These competencies are believed to clarify the link between experiences in the family of origin and adult child intimate relationships.

Relationship competencies were conceptualized as observed affect shown toward partner and self-reported relationship quality. The researchers used a prospective, multiinformant research design to provide a preliminary test of the efficacy of a part of the DEARR (Development of Early Adult Romantic Relationships) model. Parents, siblings, and a target child were all included as participants. The DEARR model was accurate in predicting behaviors toward adult romantic partners based on behavioral interactions in the family of origin and relationship success based on participants’ behaviors toward their romantic partners. Although this model provides important direction for future research, the researchers maintain that because the model was tested on a rural White sample, it is unclear whether similar results would be achieved with a more diverse sample in regard
to race and geographic location (Bryant & Conger, 2002). Qualitative research on family of origin experiences with a diverse sample could contribute to the refinement of the DEARR model or to the development of a conceptual model reflecting diverse populations.

In a nationally representative sample of approximately 6,800 participants, Busby, Dean, and Taniguchi (2005) found support for a longitudinal, parachute model comprised of family of origin variables that lead to beliefs related to intimate relationships. The variables represented ‘parachute strings’ that if weak or frayed, could negatively influence beliefs about relationships and self-esteem. This model was successful in predicting longitudinal outcomes for adult children in intimate relationships. A distinctive feature of the parachute model was the emphasis not only on specific events that occurred during childhood, but the self-reported impact of these events. The researchers included the following variables: family structure, family stressors, paternal relationship quality, parental relationship quality, parent-child relationship quality, and physical and sexual abuse. Results indicated parental relationship quality was strongly related to adult attitudes toward relationships. Compared to males, females are influenced more by the quality of their parent’s relationships. The researchers note that developing preventative programs to enrich parental marriage would help the children’s relationships later in life. Because of the gender differences in the results, they also suggested developing relationship education uniquely for males and females.

**Parental relationship quality and stability.** Families are primary sources of socialization for learning relationship competencies. An individual’s approach to core components of relationship development, such as commitment, communication, and
conflict management is partially influenced by the interactional characteristics of their parents’ relationship or marriage (Bryant & Conger, 2001). In the literature, there is empirical support for the intergenerational transmission of divorce (Amato & DeBoer, 2001). Parental marital instability has been found negatively affect adult child’s cognitions toward future relationship success. Compared to adults of non-divorced parents, adults of divorced parents often associate the institution of marriage with impermanency and cast doubt on its lifelong possibilities (Amato & DeBoer, 2001). Insecurities related to perceived personal ability to maintain a lasting relationship or marriage due to parental marital instability influence the level of commitment in personal relationships. Whitton et al. (2008a) was able to demonstrate parental divorce undermines relationship confidence and commitment among engaged adult couples. These findings were stronger for women with divorced parents. Daughters whose parents divorced reported more ambivalence not only toward their future marriage, but also toward their future partner.

**Commitment.** During childhood, children are given messages, directly and indirectly, related to intimate relationships. These messages influence their cognitive appraisals and subsequent behaviors in their own relationships. Through observing their parents, children are exposed to various aspects of relationship development, such as commitment and trust. Hinde and Stevenson-Hinde (1986) define commitment as, “…the extent to which partners accept their relationship as continuing indefinitely and direct their behavior toward ensuring its continuance or toward optimizing its properties…” (p. 31). Conceptually, Black couples have used descriptors such as ‘love and respect,
honest/truthfulness/trust, sexual fidelity, and dedication and loyalty’ to define commitment (Chaney, 2006).

The messages children are given concerning commitment are important to consider because commitment is a persistent predictor of relationship quality and stability (Drigotas, Rusbult, & Verette, 1999; Givertz & Segrin, 2005; Stanley & Markman, 1992; Wilcox & Nock, 2006). Jacquet and Surra (2001) examined the impact of parental divorce on commitment in adult child relationships through telephone surveys conducted with 464 young coupled adults who were either dating, informally committed to marriage, or engaged. Participants responded to measures of love, trust, commitment, ambivalence, conflict, and satisfaction. Parental divorce played a stronger role in females’ relationships with respect to feelings of love, trust in a partner, approach to conflict, and reservations about involvement. Daughters from divorced families reported less trust and relationship satisfaction. These daughters also reported higher ambivalence and conflict compared to daughters from intact families. The authors stated there are other predisposing issues associated with divorce that may affect cognitions and behaviors toward intimate relationships, such as the unavailability of parents and heightened conflict during the divorce process. Since women are often socialized to initiate relationship work within a couple unit, these findings have implications for applied work related to relationship development (Gillian, 1982). These studies offer further evidence that family-of-origin experiences influence commitment and confidence in intimate adult relationships, especially for women.

The impact of family-of-origin experiences is most often explored using quantitative, objective methods of inquiry. These methods are useful in establishing clear
associations and predictions, however, these methods are limited because researchers are not able to capture the rich complexities of experience. There are few studies that use the narratives of participants to explore family of origin experiences and how individuals feel these experiences influence their approach in maintaining intimate relationships. Weigel et al. (2003) gathered narrative stories from 161 college students about commitment lessons they learned from observing their parents’ relationships. From these stories, the researchers were able to develop themes surrounding commitment lessons and messages the young adults garnered from their families of origin. These themes, such as ‘Relationships are Work, Marriage is Enduring, and Relationships are Impermanent,’ provided evidence parental interactions in relationships impact adult children’s perceptions of commitment well after they have left the home. For example, one student wrote:

My parents were married (unhappily) for 20 years before they finally decided to divorce. Because of their beliefs about commitment, my brother and I grew up in a very unhappy and unhealthy atmosphere . . . From this experience, I have learned that, while commitment is an important value, sometimes it needs to be broken (p. 460).

This narrative quote illustrated the ‘Relationships are Impermanent’ theme, in which participants emphasized the message that relationships can and often should end. In the quantitative component of the study, the researchers found that participants who had not experienced a parental divorce were more likely to believe families must work through struggles in relationships, to see marriage as an enduring institution, and less likely to see marriage as impermanent compared to those students who did experience divorce (Weigel et al., 2003). These findings support research indicating the family of origin has an important impact on children’s perceptions of social relationships (Busby, Dean, &
Taniguchi, 2005). This study also demonstrates narratives and stories are valuable, methodological choices for understanding individuals’ attitudes toward intimate relationships. However, because the sample in this study was only one percent African American, recruiting a more racially diverse sample may yield different results. In regard to methodology, participants were asked to write brief stories about parental commitment messages. Conducting in-depth interviews on lessons learned during childhood and adolescence may provide richer findings in the future.

**Conflict style.** In addition to evidence supporting the impact of family of origin experiences on commitment, there is also empirical support for the intergenerational transmission of relationship aggression (Kwong et al., 2003; Murphy & Blumenthal, 2000;) and conflict resolution (Whitton et al., 2008b). These studies tend to follow and show subsequent support for a social learning hypothesis: young adults imitate the behaviors they observe their parents demonstrate in intimate relationships (Bandura, 1977). Previous research has shown adult children model both positive and negative relationships behaviors. Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2002) found adult children who grew up in a family that regarded conflict as normal and dealt with it in a constructive and supportive manner reported high frequencies of positive conflict and demonstrated high skill levels in interpersonal conflict. Whitton et al., (2008b) tested the social learning hypothesis in a longitudinal model examining the relationship between family conflict interactions and the offspring’s later marital conflict interaction patterns. From the sample of 47 mostly White participants, the researchers were able to determine that the hostility and positive interactions observed in the parent’s marriage persisted in the adult child’s marital interactions. In another longitudinal test of the DEARR model discussed
earlier, Hare, Miga, and Allen (2009) found that the interactional styles exhibited in the parent’s relationships during early teenage years were also found in their adolescent’s intimate relationship five years later. Specifically, paternal aggression in the parents’ relationship continued into the adolescents’ intimate relationship. Aggression was conceptualized as the frequency of physical aggression between partners during conflict. Paternal aggression influenced interactional styles in adolescents’ intimate relationships in regard to both perpetration and victimization.

There is evidence, although somewhat mixed, that children may follow a script mimicking the gender roles of their parents during instances of physical aggression. Jankowski, Leitenberg, Henning, and Coffey (1999) found evidence that witnessing a same-sex parent perpetrating relationship aggression placed children at an increased risk for later perpetrating marital aggression. However, witnessing the victimization of a same-sex parent did not increase the risk of becoming a victim in the future. Conversely, Gover, Kaukinen, and Fox (2008) were able to find a significant relationship between witnessing paternally perpetrated abuse in the family-of-origin and dating violence victimization among females in their sample of college students. Although these findings place the family-of-origin as a clear pathway through which children learn how to behave in their own relationships, one meta-analysis did reveal a weak-to-moderate relationship for this association among studies on the relationship between domestic violence in the home and subsequent involvement in an abusive relationship as an adult (Stith et al., 2000).

**Parent-child relationship quality.** Attachment theory is commonly utilized as a primary theoretical framework in research on the influence of the parent-child
relationship on adult child relationship development and quality. When viewing a parent-child relationship with an attachment lens, a child must form a bond with a primary caregiver for normal social and emotional development to occur. Attachment styles that individuals become accustomed to during infancy and childhood often reflect attachment in adult intimate relationships, which ultimately influence relationship success. Bowlby (1973), a major contributor to attachment theory believed repeated interactions with a primary caregiver or attachment figure provide a prism through which individuals conduct self-appraisals and a guide for interactions in other close relationships. These cognitive dimensions of attachment affect self-esteem in regard to the level of care, attention, and love individuals believe they deserve in a close relationship (Bowlby, 1973, Feeney & Noller, 1990). Hazan and Shaver (1994) supported the utility of attachment frameworks in the study of close relationships. They contend negative patterns of attachment in intimate relationships among adults can be traced to an individual’s attachment experiences with primary caregivers during the formative years. hooks (2000) eloquently articulated the importance of attachment in developing love for self and others:

We are not born knowing how to love anyone, either ourselves or somebody else. However, we are born able to respond to care. As we grow we can give and receive attention, affection, and joy. Whether we learn how to love ourselves and others will depend on the presence of loving environment (p. 53).

In this sense, examining the parent-child relationship can offer insight into an individual’s self-identity and social relationships as an adult.

The quality of the parent-child relationship and its relation to subsequent romantic relationship has been linked to various dimensions of relationship quality. Holman and Associates (2001) report the parent-child relationship as a robust premarital predictor of
future relationship success. Secure attachments to caregiver(s), where the level of warmth, attention, responsiveness, and affection is high, is related to having satisfying, fulfilling relationships as adults (Conger, et al., 2000). Individuals who were shown love and nurturing in a healthy, consistent manner from their caregiver(s) while growing up will perceive this type of interaction in close relationships as normative. As a result, they will model their behaviors and expectations after this pattern. Conversely, individuals who experience unstable, inconsistent, unhealthy attachments with caregiver(s) often have trouble establishing and maintaining close intimate relationships as adults.

In a longitudinal study of 264 undergraduate students, Henry and Holmes (1998) found that while adult daughters who experienced parental divorce reported optimism and satisfaction in their current relationships, they also expressed fear of abandonment, magnified threats of negative relationship outcomes, and exhibited hypervigilant cognitions when appraising their partners’ behaviors or moods. The researchers partially attributed daughter insecurities to the father-daughter relationship. Opposite-sex parents provide important proximal models from which sons and daughters will measure future mates (Collins & Read, 1990). Daughters may internalize their father leaving the home as abandonment and begin to create negative self-representations, which are then projected onto future partners (Henry & Holmes, 1998). In the divorce, a daughter’s attachment to her father may be compromised due to possibly disruption or dissolution of their relationship.

Hall (2009) also examined the role of fathers on daughter’s heterosexual relationship socialization and found that father-to-mother treatment and paternal support were associated with secure attachment styles as adults, however, there was weak support
for gender differences in father-child dyad. Refining this line of research on adult daughters-father relationships, particularly among Black women, is important among because nearly two out of three African American children grow up living in a home without a residential father (Krider & Elliott, 2009). However, research on this topic is limited.

Parenting behavior styles are also predictors of relationship competence in early adult relationships. To illustrate, Conger, Cui, Bryant, and Elder (2000) found that parenting style in the family of origin predicted behaviors in the target youth’s future romantic relationship. Specifically, this prospective, longitudinal study was able to predict behaviors among the adult children toward their partners based on the type of parenting they received in their family of origin. Adult children who experienced nurturing, involved parenting were more likely to exhibit warm, supportive, and minimally hostile behaviors to their romantic partners. Interestingly, in the structural equation analysis, it was the parenting behaviors of the target youth and not necessarily the parental marital interactions that influenced the quality of intimate relationships in early adult relationships. This study addressed limitations in previous research by successfully testing a longitudinal model predicting adult relationship competence. However, all sample participants were White and from a rural area. Therefore, the results may not be reflective of the way parenting styles influence relationship competence among individuals from other cultural and racial backgrounds.

**Parent-child communication.** Our personal perspectives and behaviors are significantly influenced by messages we receive in our environment. Direct communication provides individuals with a foundation to form their perceptions and
behaviors toward specific objects. On a micro level, several family processes, such as parent-child communication, are critical to understanding intimate relationship socialization. Empirical literature on parent-child communication concerning intimate relationships is situated in research on sexual socialization in the home. Researchers have mostly focused their efforts on the sexual communication between parent and child because of the long-term consequences that sexual risk behavior can have on quality of life. Adolescents have been identified as at risk for negative sexual outcomes. Therefore, researchers have given considerable attention to factors influencing sexual behavior in adolescence and young adulthood. Young Black males and females are especially at risk for adverse health outcomes, such as HIV, other sexually transmitted diseases, and unintended pregnancy. Existing research has demonstrated parent-child communication is significantly related to the development of sexual values and behaviors among adolescents and young adults (Guzman, et al., 2003; Hutchinson & Montgomery, 2007). Parent-child sexual communication during adolescence continues to impact children’s sexual behaviors even after they have left the home (Lehr, Dilorio, Dudley, & Lipana, 2000).

In recent years, several studies have emerged on the prevalence and impact of parent-daughter communication. Researchers commonly employ instruments measuring sexual behaviors, such as daughters’ sexual attitudes, virginity status, age of sexual debut, sexual communication with male partners, condom use self-efficacy, as well as instruments measuring general and sexual communication between parents and daughters. Sexual communication has widely been determined through examining the timing and frequency of discussions on abstinence, the negative consequences of (early)
sexual involvement, pregnancy prevention strategies, and resisting pressure to engage in sexual involvement (Hutchinson, 2007). In the past, many studies have trended toward focusing on the impact of the maternal-child dyad on child sexual behavior and attitudes. For example, when discussing sexual topics, conversations most often occur between mothers and daughters (Dilorio, Kelly, & Hockenberry-Eaton, 1999).

Studies examining maternal-daughter communication have demonstrated higher-level mother-daughter sexual risk communication is associated with lower rates of sexual involvement and unprotected sex, particularly among urban, African American adolescent females (Hutchinson et al., 2003; Pequegnat & Szapocznik, 2000). Daughters who engage in sexual communication with their mothers are also more likely to develop conservative sexual attitudes and later sexual debut (Dilorio, Kelley, & Hockenberry-Eaton, 1999). However, research has shown the types of messages given during sexual discussions are related to the likelihood of sexual involvement (Usher-Seriki, Bynum, and Callands, 2008).

While these studies were able to establish significant relationships between maternal-child sexual communication and child sexual outcomes, chiefly among young, inner-city females, Usher-Seriki, Bynum, and Callands (2008) identified a link between the content of maternal-daughter communication and sexual outcomes among middle-to upper class African American girls. In this study of 274 upwardly mobile African American females 15 to 17 years old, the researchers were able to confirm (a) positive mother-daughter relationship quality decreases the likelihood of sexual intercourse; (b) more frequent communication about general sexual topics predicts an increased likelihood of sexually active daughters; and (c) frequent maternal-daughter
communication about sexual values is connected to a decreased likelihood of sexual intercourse. The notion that explicit parental messages communicating opposition toward premarital sex will decrease the likelihood of premarital sex has been supported in previous research as well (Werner-Wilson, 1998). This study provided a basis for further examination into the impact of moral values infused into sexual communication among Black mothers and daughters. Since religiosity and spirituality are prevailing features of Black community life, research on this topic could be fruitful to understanding of relationship socialization among Black females, not only in terms of sexuality, but also gender role values in intimate relationships.

In a unique study focusing on Black religious symbolism and mothering techniques, Barnes and Bynum (2010) explored mother-daughter narratives about sexuality to understand the influence of religious paradigms in secular spaces. The researchers investigated the presence of priestly versus prophetic functions in sexual narratives among 75 Black mothers and their late-adolescent, collegiate daughters utilizing quantitative and qualitative inquiry. Priestly functions used in dialogue about sexuality are generally grounded in scriptural references encouraging heterosexuality, abstinence until marriage, monogamy, and traditional gender roles. Barnes and Bynum (2010) assert priestly functions address religious rather than temporal needs and rarely challenge status quo. Conversely, individuals who champion prophetic functions are comfortable in using creative ways to engage in sexual communication and embrace ideologies and behaviors extending beyond traditional, conservative mandates that tend to emphasize abstinence or avoid addressing significant issues surrounding sexuality (Barnes & Bynum, 2010). Mothers who hold prophetic views support open
communication about sensitive and controversial topics in an effort to empower daughters to make informed decisions regarding their sexual attitudes and behaviors.

In the mother’s written narratives, Barnes and Bynum (2010) were able to identify evidence of both priestly and prophetic themes in mother-daughter sexual communication and associate these narratives with sexual behaviors among the daughters. Mothers who communicated priestly views strongly encouraged morally sanctioned abstinence and participated in limited discussions about sexuality. Mothers with prophetic perspectives tended to focus more on relationship development, self-agency, and critical thinking among their daughters and less on imparting actual sexual knowledge. These mothers were also more likely to foster open lines of communication with their daughters, which caused daughters to feel more comfortable engaging their mothers in sexual discussions. The daughters who were socialized with prophetic views tended to mention core components of intimate relationships, such as trust, love, respect, and agency.

Both functions may be helpful in reducing sexual risk behavior and sexual involvement because all the daughters reported varying levels of sexual activity regardless of mothers’ sexual communication. Nevertheless, few mothers reported giving sexual knowledge related to condom use, contraception, and sexually transmitted diseases, so daughters were left without this knowledge or received it from formal institutions. Although the researchers considered sexual debut, number of partners, sexual behaviors, and condom use among daughters, sexual outcomes such as pregnancy, sexual assault, and sexual transmitted diseases should also be considered in the context of mother-daughter sexual socialization.
In comparison to mothers, fathers have been traditionally excluded from the research on parental sexual socialization despite the acknowledged importance of fathers on their daughters’ sexual and relationship behavior (Hepburn, 1981). Excluding fathers from the empirical literature on sexual and relationship socialization further perpetuates the gendered parenting roles and leads to mother-blaming wherein the outcomes of children are placed on the heads of mothers (Phares, 1992). In an investigation analyzing the concurrent impact of several variables on adolescent sexual behavior, Werner-Wilson (1998) determined female children are influenced by both their mother and father. Specifically, female children were influenced by joint parental discussion of sexual values, mothers’ sexual attitudes, as well as father-daughter communication. These findings highlight the importance of including both mothers and fathers in research on child sexual behavior outcomes.

Fathers may have a qualitatively distinct influence on their daughters compared to mothers. More recent studies have shown the quality of father-daughter relationships affects self-esteem, which in turn influence self-identity and personal values in the context of intimate relationships. In an in-depth focus group study, Weiland-Bowling and Werner-Wilson (2000) gained self-reports of paternal influences on sexual behavior from 17 college women. Findings reconfirmed father-daughter relationship quality as a significant factor in the construction of sexual values and decision-making. Several daughters associated sexual risk behavior with limited emotional closeness with fathers and father absence pointing to need to fill their father’s position through intimate relationships and early sexual involvement. The women also indicated fathers do and should promote responsible relationship and sexual behavior through modeling and
communication. Fathers assist their daughters in establishing expectations for a male partner through how they treat their mothers or female partners. Additionally, some of the women expressed the value of a father’s perspective and guidance in understanding men and effectively negotiating sexual involvement in their relationships. Although the sample used in this study was homogenous in regard to race, the findings provided firsthand recollections of how fathering influences the sexual and relationship socialization of young women.

In a racially diverse sample of 234 late-adolescent women, Hutchinson and Cederbaum (2010) reported similar findings on the role of father-daughter communication using open-ended, self-reported responses. This study expanded on previous research by specifically asking women messages they received from their fathers about dating in addition to sexual communication. Although less than 10 percent of the sample felt their fathers had adequately prepared them for dating and sexuality, the women offered insightful narratives about contributions fathers made and could have made to their sexual socialization.

Although, there is great deal of literature on the parental role in the sexual socialization of children, the literature presented here demonstrates the absence of research on the influence of parent-child communication on relationship socialization. While it is important to understand parental-daughter communication patterns about sexual behavior because of the strong influence on future behavior, it is similarly advantageous to understand what information or advice is given about relationships and dating in general. Sexual behavior often happens against the backdrop of intimate relationships or the desire to develop an intimate relationship. Further qualitative inquiry
on relationship communication in the parental-child dyad should be conducted to determine the prevalence, content, and consequences of parent-child communication related intimate relationship development. Because a great deal of the existing research focuses on young Black females who experiences are often associated with poverty, more attention should be devoted to relationship behavior and parental-daughter communication among college bound Black females (Bynum, 2007). The motivation behind parental messages related to relationships and sex may be distinct for daughters entering college. This line of research could also inform the development of quantitative instruments measuring parent-child intimate relationship communication.

**Gender socialization.** Gender socialization in the family unit influences the manner in which individuals view and behave within intimate relationships. Although there are several sources in an individual’s environment that influence their construction of gender roles, family members provide proximal examples of these roles, directly and indirectly. When discussing gender role socialization, I am referring to the idea that “…individuals observe, imitate, and eventually internalize the specific attitudes and behaviors that the culture defines as gender appropriate by using other males and females as role models” (Ickes, 1993, p. 79). The messages parents give their children concerning gender are salient when applied to Grusec’s (2002) third goal of socialization mentioned earlier, which focuses on the development of role taking skills and ways of viewing relationships. Gender role socialization is constructed within and constrained by larger sociocultural and economic forces that influence role development among individuals.

Many of the studies conducted on the gender role socialization in Black families tend to find that these families cultivate egalitarian attitudes in the home. Many Black
parents find it a necessity to teach both their sons and daughters to take care of all household tasks, particularly if resources are limited and there is only one parent in the home (Hill, 2005). Scholars have asserted many Black families have never fully accepted or have been able to fulfill the traditional family model with a male breadwinner and a female homemaker largely due to racial inequality and discrimination (Hill, 1999; hooks, 2001).

Historically, racial discrimination directed toward Black men and women compelled Black women to adopt work, accomplishment, and independence into their ethos as women (Giddings, 1984). Consequently, these same priorities are emphasized to both daughters and sons in Black families. Research has shown both Black girls and boys are taught to be independent, self-reliant, assertive, and self-sufficient (Hill, 1999; Hill, 2002; Scott, 1993). In a qualitative study on child gender socialization among a sample of Black parents from various social and class backgrounds, Hill (2002) revealed pervasive support for gender equality among the parents she interviewed regardless of the sex of the parent or the child. A mother of a nine-year old son in the study discussed her egalitarian views on marital roles:

I definitely teach my son that men and women are equal; he is not the head of anybody. His wife will always have input and say-so in whatever is going on in their lives. And he needs to know that…when we were growing up, boys washed dishes, boys cooked; girls washed dishes, girls cooked. My mother taught us pretty equally to do everything, just in case you were on your own you wouldn’t have to depend on somebody (p. 497).

Several of the parents in Hill’s (2002) study stated they instilled similar values and expectations in their daughters and sons related to carrying out household tasks, interpersonal dynamics, educational achievement and career orientation. However, Hill (2002) did note class-based differences among the parents in her study. She described
several newly middle-class parents as being tentative in their support for gender equality. While these parents expressed wanting their daughters to be strong, independent, and treated equally in the workplace, they often embraced traditional gender roles within the home and the desire for traditionally feminine characteristics in their daughters. Hill (2002) explains this seeming contradiction as a way for some Black, middle-class families to distance themselves from the stereotypical racialized images of Black families who are poor and headed by females. The result is a message that emphasizes strong, Black womanhood and success in the labor market, but also the notion that men are supposed to take care of them in the home.

Aside from social class, Hill (2002) also found religion to be a salient factor in socializing daughters and sons. She found religious respondents were more likely to adhere to Christian, biblical principles endorsing traditional gendered roles for women and men. Following Christian principles also motivated parents to discourage behavior that would lead to boys being viewed as ‘sissies’ and girls as ‘tomboys.’ The primary motivation behind this vigilance was attempting to prevent homosexuality among their children. However, parents were much more likely to tolerate cross-gender typed behaviors in daughters than sons. Belgrave (2009) explains this aspect of gender socialization contributes to androgynous gender role beliefs among young Black women.

Some scholars contend that Black daughters are basically instructed to take on everything and master all spheres of their lives. Collins (1987) asserts the socialization techniques of many Black mothers are motivated by their awareness of the oppression, sexism, and racism their daughters may face in the future. Collins (1987) explains:

Black daughters are expected to work, strive for an education so that they can support themselves, and to anticipate carrying heavy responsibilities in their
families and communities because these skills are essential for their own survival and the survival for whom they will be eventually responsible (p. 7).

There is evidence Black parents encourage self-reliance and achievement more in their daughters in comparison to sons (Staples & Johnson, 1993). If women sense the lack of self-sufficiency and independence in Black men they encounter, do they feel more compelled to ‘take on everything’ or experience a sense of unrelenting responsibility for everyone in their lives? The question of how this difference in socialization affects the intimate relationship development of Black women and men is an understudied topic in the literature. However, there is evidence Black women have developed negative stereotypes for Black men when appraising their work ethic and ability to take care of a family.

In an early ethnographic study of 26 Black, adolescent females living in or near a housing project, Ladner (1968) found that these young women came to view men as unreliable and unsupportive based on observations in their environment. Ladner (1968) explained:

> These perceptions determined to a great extent the way in which these girls interacted with men. Their belief that only a small number of men could be depended on to fulfill their aspirations for a stable marriage and family life came from their vicarious experience with men as abandoning fathers and husbands, runaway brothers-in-laws, and so on. The idea that men are impulsive or weak was formed very early (p. 85).

The idea that men could not be trusted to successfully meet the demands of a father or husband is echoed by other scholars highlighting the socialization of Black females. These messages are developed through observations, personal experiences and direct communication. In discussions with her Black female college students, Collins (1987) shared that many of their mothers taught them to adopt somewhat skeptical views of men
and to make certain they were always in a position to take care of themselves. These mothers expressed an insistence they become self-reliant and resourceful (Collins, 1987). As they become adults and form more serious intimate relationships, these messages and experiences can affect their interpersonal trust, commitment, and overall outlook on relationships and marriage.

The belief that ties with Black men are impermanent and uncertain influences the manner in which Black women develop intimate relationships. In an effort to address the pathologized discourse on Black mothers, Burton and Tucker (2009) describe the absence of stability through uncertainty, an alternative framework for why and how Black women, especially low-income Black women, form and operate within romantic relationships. Through their research with Black women, Burton and Tucker (2009) have been able to observe how condensed life spans, economic hardship, and structural conditions dissuade women from being able to rely on notions of stability in their environments. Although, uncertainty in intimate relationships seems to be a salient experience in the lives of Black women, the meaning of marriage and commitment among many Americans in general is uncertain (Cherlin, 2004). This uncertainty has led many to redefine what they have been socialized to think about marriage as an institution, especially in regard to gender expectations (Cherlin, 2004).

**Intimate Relationship Socialization in Relationship Experiences**

Intimate relationships can also serve as a source of socialization. Dating, the process of meeting and interacting with individuals in social environments for the purpose of possible long-term mate selection, is an important task during young adulthood (Erikson, 1963). Dating and forming healthy relationships provide important benefits for personal development. Intimate relationships influence the third outcome of
socialization, which is the goal of learning role-taking skills, strategies for resolving conflicts, and ways of viewing relationships (Arnett, 2007). They offer opportunities to build self-competence and self-esteem to further develop and practice conflict resolution skills, to build wisdom on identifying, forming, and maintaining healthy relationships as well as ending unhealthy relationships, and to experience emotions that provide clues to personal goals and desires (Collins, 2003). The lessons learned while dating and developing relationships are often carried into future relationships. Therefore, intimate relationship history is an important aspect to consider when exploring the pathways through which individuals construct their understanding of knowing and being in intimate relationships (Few, 1999). The effects of intimate relationships can be associated with Grusec’s (2002) third outcome of socialization, which relates to learning role-taking, conflict management skills, and developing worldviews on relationships (Arnett, 2007). The learning that takes place within a context of an intimate relationship is distinct from learning that occurs between parents and children because the acquisition and execution of relationship skills takes place between two intimate partners presumably sharing equal power in a relationship (Arnett, 2007). Self-socialization in intimate relationships influences the quality and stability of current and subsequent relationships.

To illustrate, if individuals experience positive personal growth following the breakup of an intimate relationship, the quality of their next relationship may improve (Tashiro & Frazier, 2003). Stress-related growth following a breakup is understudied in the literature. Stress-related growth is the idea that individuals can grow beyond their previous level of psychological and emotional functioning as a result of experiencing a stressful or traumatic event (Park & Fenster, 2004; Tedeschi, Park, & Calhoun, 1998).
Exploring this area is important because relationship dissolution and instability are major life events that induce considerable stress (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). Tashiro and Frazier (2003) examined life changes following the breakup of an intimate relationship with a sample of 92 undergraduate college students. In the qualitative component of the study, participants were asked to describe positive changes as a result of their breakup that may serve to improve future romantic relationships. The researchers categorized the channels of personal growth following a breakup using a causal attribution framework for close relationships. The four categories were **Person**, **Other**, **Relational**, and **Environmental**. These attribution categories described the dimension of growth or learning participants experienced as a result of a breakup. For example, **Person** causal attributions are related to personal traits, physical characteristics, abilities, and beliefs (e.g., my passive nature). **Other** causal attributions are directed at an individual’s partners, such as the partner’s personal characteristics, abilities, and beliefs (e.g., his constant nagging). **Relational** attributes refer to the interaction between **Person** and **Other**, such as opposite belief systems between partners. **Environmental** attributions encompass the social environment around the relationship, which may be racism or friends’ disapproval of the partner. In the qualitative measure of personal growth, respondents reported an average of five positive changes that have the potential to improve their future romantic relationships. The most commonly reported causal attribution was **Person**, with many respondents stating they felt stronger, more self-confident, more independent, and better off emotionally. Example statements in this dimension were, “I am more self-confident,” and “Through breaking up I found I can handle more on my own.” (Tashiro & Frazier, 2003,
Those who reported *Relational* growth most commonly cited gaining relational wisdom, such as learning relationship skills that could be applied in the future.

Few and Bell-Scott (2002) also highlighted the salience of positive personal growth in the process to leave psychologically abusive dating relationships among a sample of Black college women. As one of the four stages in the termination process identified through in-depth interviews with these women, the declaration of self-empowerment marked a stage where the women engaged in rebuilding self-esteem, validating personal needs and desires, and processing lessons learned from the relationship (Few & Bell-Scott, 2002). Understanding your emotional heritage and reflecting on lessons learned over the course of a relationship is a valuable activity to improve relationship quality (Gottman & DeClaire, 2001). Becoming aware of your personal emotional history may help alter patterns of cognition or interaction harmful to relationship development (Gottman & DeClaire, 2001). In her therapeutic work with Black women, Boyd-Franklin (1989) identified the impact of unresolved issues in past relationships on current relationships as a recurring theme. Unresolved issues in previous relationships are commonly viewed as negative partner ‘baggage,’ which could affect partner perceptions and relationship quality (Sidelinger & Booth-Butterfield, n.d.). These findings underscore the need to understand the use of reflection as a tool for personal growth in intimate relationship development.

**Theoretical Standpoint**

*Symbolic interactionism theory.* Symbolic interactionism is the suggested theory base for descriptive modes of qualitative inquiry (Artinian, 1988). Sandelowski (2000) contends that qualitative descriptive studies draw from general principles of naturalistic inquiry where there is no a priori commitment to any one theoretical view of
the phenomenon under study. However, symbolic interactionism provides a meta-level theoretical framework for understanding the pathways in which individuals construct their unique environments based on social interactions and how these constructed meanings influence behavior. This framework does not cast predictions on individual interpretations or actions, but rather uses a lens to examine the nature of interactions taking place between individuals. Actually, the assumptions made in symbolic interactionism theory inherently lend this theory to guiding qualitative research (Blumer, 1969).

Blumer (1969), a major contributor to symbolic interactionism, contended that qualitative research was the most appropriate means of obtaining an understanding of the process in which individuals create perceptions and interpretations of their environments. As LaRossa and Reitzes (1993) explained, “It essentially is a frame of reference for understanding how humans, in concert with one another, create symbolic worlds and how these worlds, in turn, shape human behavior” (p. 136). This theoretical framework is particularly suited for exploring personal and social constructions of intimacy including the manner in which roles, expectations, attitudes, and behaviors are learned and ultimately played out (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). Based on the research question for the present study, “Through what pathways do young Black collegiate women construct their understanding of knowing and being in intimate relationships?”, the symbolic interactionism perspective was useful because it focuses on the construction of personal standpoint as these women continually interact with their surroundings. Additionally, Few, Stephens, and Rouse-Arnett (2003) assert symbolic interactionism is a suitable framework for guiding qualitative research conducted with Black women.
Blumer (1969) explained three premises of symbolic interactionism relevant to this study. First, human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the thing has for them. In other words, individuals will interact with an object or person based on the meaning or definition assigned to it. In this view, to understand a person’s behavior toward an object or figure, you must uncover the meaning that individual attaches to that object or figure. The meanings that are attached to language, symbols, and other human beings structure perceptions we hold toward our environments. For example, if a woman views a man as dishonest and self-serving, she may confine their connection to only superficial interactions and avoid developing a deep, emotional bond with him where she is vulnerable to hurt and deception. The manner in which this woman offers and withholds trusts is based on her interpretations of a man’s integrity.

Second, the meanings of these objects and figures are derived from or arise out of the social interactions that one has with other individuals. Creating meaning does not occur in a vacuum. Through observation and experience, individuals attach meanings to objects that are both personally and socially constructed. To illustrate, this same woman may perceive a man or men as dishonest and self-serving because she has experienced past relationships with men who are selfish and dishonest. Additionally, her previous experiences are reinforced by seeing her girlfriends experience similar relationships with men. While growing up, her mother consistently relayed to her that men are sneaky and distrustful and to always be leery and keep one eye open in her dealings with men. Taken together, this woman’s experiences, observations, and messages she has been given about men have worked to inform her perception of men in general.
Third, these meanings are handled and modified through an interpretative process used by the person dealing with the things she encounters. The meaning-making process is dynamic in nature, therefore, individuals have the opportunity to reconstruct meaning when they engage in interpretation of and reflection on their interactions. Because the meanings individuals have toward objects or figures can change over time according to symbolic interactionism, the same woman can alter her perceptions of men at any time. For example, this woman begins dating a man that shows different characteristics than men of her past, such as honesty, openness, dedication, and selflessness. As a result, her views that all men are dishonest and self-serving change because this man’s actions have debunked her previously held ideas about men. She even opened herself up to vulnerability by developing an emotionally close relationship with this man because she feels she can trust him with her feelings. In this example, the woman engaged in reflection on her interactions, which subsequently altered the perceptions she has held toward men.

In my discussions with participants, I focused on past and present experiences with intimate relationships and how these experiences shaped their perceptions of intimate relationships, both on personal and universal levels. Understanding the fluid process of socialization is a major focus of the symbolic interactionist (White & Klein, 2008). I focused on the process of socialization and self-socialization in understanding how these women constructed their perspectives and how these perspectives manifested in their behaviors. Using the symbolic interactionism framework allowed me to discover the multiple descriptions and meanings that my participants assign to the interactions in
their families, with their peers and friends, and in their symbolic environments and how these meanings evolved over time.
Chapter Three: Methodology

In this study, I examined the pathways through which young Black collegiate women learn about intimate relationships. My sample included 10 women from this population. A fundamental qualitative descriptive approach guided the data collection and data analysis procedures.

Qualitative Description as the Qualitative Methodology

The major goal of this study was to understand the experiences through which young Black collegiate women construct their understanding of intimate relationships. The research question guided the methodology used in this study (Giorgi, 2005). Here, the overarching research question was: Through what pathways do young, Black, collegiate women construct their understanding of knowing and being in intimate relationships? Specifically, I explored the descriptions and meaning they assign to their learning experiences with respect to developing intimate relationships. My research question explores what Giorgi (2005) would describe as an “…experiential dimension of a phenomena…” which is not most appropriate for quantitative analysis (p. 80). Quantitative methods that espouse numerical precision, prediction, and causality do not adequately capture the essence of a phenomenon through the eyes of those who experience it in their daily lives. Researchers following the Cartesian method champion objectivity through approaches that separate them from individuals under study, rendering them unable to address human issues in a meaningful, thoughtful way (Giorgi, 2005). A qualitative approach represents an opposing paradigm which privileges perspective and the idea that truth is variable and relative (Sadala & Adorno, 2002). Fundamental qualitative description, as a qualitative method, seeks to describe the comprehensive summary of events with their accompanying personal meanings in the
everyday terms of those events (Sandelowski, 2000). My task was to stay close to the data in deriving themes and patterns. Sandelowski (2000) contends, “In qualitative descriptive studies, language is a vehicle of communication, not itself an interpretive structure that must be read (2000, p. 336). Therefore, my goal, as the research instrument was to explore the meanings these women have constructed from their learning experiences using their language and provide a comprehensive, thick description of these experiences.

**Fundamental qualitative description compared to other traditional human science methods.** Human science research methods do hold commonalities that position them distinct from traditional positivist approaches. In a general sense, human science research is concerned with (a) focusing on the wholeness of experience rather than fragments or specific objects, (b) searching for meanings and essences of experiences, (c) gaining descriptions of these experiences through first-person narratives, and (d) developing questions that mirror the interest, involvement, and personal commitment of the researcher (Moustakas, 1994). While human science research holds these common bonds, the various human science research methods have unique goals and resulting products.

When determining the most suitable method for a research project, the research question should be used as the guide. The overarching research question guiding this project is: *Through what pathways do young, Black, collegiate women construct their understanding of knowing and being in intimate relationships?* Because my question is focused on understanding rather than causality or generalizability, it is appropriate for a human science research method. Qualitative modes of inquiry are more appropriate for
research questions related to understanding a topic or construct. Qualitative description was chosen as the most appropriate methodology for the proposed research question because this method allows for a presentation of the learning experiences of the participants in their everyday language. Other qualitative methods do not necessarily have the same focus.

To illustrate, biographical studies emphasize gaining a narrative of turning points in an individual’s life through interviews, documents, and archival materials. Although I do ask participants about their family and relationship history, biographies focus on chronology and historical context. Grounded theory methods focus on generating substantive theory about a phenomenon. However, I was more concerned with the way in which participants described their learning experiences and assigned meaning to them as opposed to developing a theoretical framework at this stage of my research on the topic. Ethnographic studies, such as the study conducted by Edin and Kefalas (2005) with low-income mothers experiencing alternative life course trajectories, focus on discovering group social processes and cultural behaviors chiefly gained in natural settings. Qualitative description is favored over ethnography because my goal is to offer a presentation of facts derived from the women’s life experiences, not to provide a holistic view of a social-cultural group (Creswell, 1998). Lastly, researchers who follow phenomenological approaches are concerned with uncovering structures and the universal essences of an experience. These approaches mandate the researcher to move farther into the data, having to not just read words and scenes, but reading between and into the lines. With qualitative description, the words and meanings given by the participants are the center of analysis and subsequent themes promulgated from the data do not venture far
from the data. My approach here was guided largely by the fundamental qualitative
description design features offered by Sandelowski (2000).

**Fundamental qualitative description.** My research project was guided by the
qualitative descriptive design features outlined by Sandelowski (2000) with respect to
overall inquiry and analysis. A specific research method is helpful in carrying out a
systematic way of achieving a goal. My goal was arriving at a description of the learning
experiences of young Black collegiate women with respect to intimate relationship
development. Despite the use of a particular method, Moustakas (1994) contends human
science research methodology is open-ended and there are no definitive or exhaustive
requirements. He assumes every research project “…holds its own integrity and
establishes its own methods and procedures to facilitate the flow of the investigation and
collection of data” (1994, p. 104). Therefore, the steps and procedures I will describe
were used as a road map for this project, but I exercised flexibility when necessary
throughout the process. For example, Sandelowski (2000) holds that despite each
qualitative approach having its own integrity, they may have hues, tones, and textures
from other qualitative approaches. This present study has certain phenomenological hues
because I inquired about the life experiences of my participants and I engaged in a self-
reflexive process, which are both main features of phenomenological approaches.

**Self-Reflexive Process**

My self-reflexive process commenced when I began formulating my research
question and trying to understand what I wanted to know from my participants. As family
scholars, we need to understand how we arrive at the research we conduct. Allen (2000)
emphasizes the importance of creating an “informed reflexive consciousness” (p. 7),
whereby we are explicit about who we are and what we assume in the context of the
complex issues we explore. When conducting qualitative research with Black women, Few, Stephens, and Rouse-Arnett (2003) state self-reflexivity serves as an agent in promoting reconciliation of personal reasons for studying a certain population and the degree of accountability indebted to that population. Since I am invested in this topic, it is important for me to make my biases, perceptions, and opinions related to the current topic explicit in an effort to prevent them from unduly influencing the research process. Moreover, as a Black woman, I am privileged to be able to present the stories of these women to various communities while also having the opportunity to discredit possible stereotypes about this population (Few, Stephens, & Rouse-Arnett, 2003). This process is also similar to the *epoche* process found in some phenomenological approaches. In the *epoche* process, the researcher is to search within self to identify and acknowledge their personal biases and attitudes related to the topic under study.

My purpose in engaging in this self-reflexive process is to provide a story behind my line of research. There are several forces that influence my perceptions of young Black women in couple relationships. First of all, I was a young Black female in a relationship while attending college. Additionally, I have had several professional experiences involving promoting healthy relationships and marriages through both research and programming. Consequently, I have a strong understanding of the empirical literature related to relationship quality and stability as well as relationship education and programming. Despite my understanding of what skills and interactional behaviors are necessary for a successful relationship, I know less about the etiology behind attitudes and behaviors related to intimate relationship development. I had a strong interest in understanding how people learn to think about relationships and behave in relationships. I
assumed that learning about relationships is both a developmental and experiential process and I wanted to formally explore these processes with other Black women.

I have a wide circle of Black girlfriends; some of them older than me and some younger. I have had the opportunity to observe their relationships and hear their praises as well as their complaints about relationships and partners. Relationships and love remain one of our most discussed topics. Listening to their stories about maintaining good, satisfying relationships and marriages has left me at times with feelings of pessimism about my chances of forming a loving relationship. Because of the ‘not-so-great’ dating and relationship experiences I have had over the last few years coupled with the disappointing episodes in my girlfriends’ relationships, I have often felt I was suffering from ‘relationship trauma.’ Meaning that my hope and optimism about love and creating love with another person was slowly fading because when I looked around me, I observed a great deal of sadness, inequities, infidelity, mistrust, and various forms of abuse. With that said though, I still witnessed the overwhelming effort to ‘make it work’ and ‘stick it out.’ I admire many of my girlfriends who have endeavored to make their relationships work in the name of love as they understand love. Despite my moments with ‘relationship trauma,’ I have remained surprisingly hopeful that I will have the relationship I envision.

Over time, when I examine my own decisions in relationships, I have struggled with understanding how my interactional patterns were created and how my experiences have colored my current relationship life at both conscious and subconscious levels. I have given a great a deal of thought to the way in which my observations of intimate relationship within my social networks have influenced my outlook and approach to
developing relationships. In effect, I have asked myself similar questions I posed to my participants, “How did I get here?”, “Why did I begin thinking the way I do about relationships?”, and “Why do I behave the way I do in dating or relationship situations?” I asked myself these questions on many levels in the context of my intimate relationships. My experiences in relationships, those wonderful and dreadful, I believe have led to this line of research. I also believe culturally relevant, efficacious relationship education curriculum can aid individuals in establishing healthy, fulfilling intimate relationships. My hope is that conducting research on the present topic will contribute to the development of such curriculum.

My general assumptions and attitudes about young Black women who are involved in relationships and about developing relationships in general are:

- Many young Black women have limited models of healthy relationships and marriages in their families and communities.
- Black women face challenges in relationship development that are distinct from their female counterparts in other racial groups, such as strained relationships with Black men, limited mate availability, and negotiating gendered relationships.
- Young Black women have difficulty in establishing and communicating their standards for intimate partners and expectations for their intimate relationships.
- Many young Black women have not learned to effectively address the challenges, and hurt, and disappointment experienced in past relationships, which adversely influences future relationship development.
- Young Black women envision successful relationships for themselves, but often their behaviors do not support that outcome.
• I believe two whole, healthy people should come into a relationship together. Some women and men think a relationship or partner will ‘fix’ their personal issues.

• I do not condone abuse in any form, emotional, verbal, physical, psychological or otherwise, and it is difficult for me to support any type of relationship where such abuse is present.

• I am also particularly vigilant of relationships in which the male partners exhibit controlling, manipulative, or coercive behaviors, in part because I have experienced this type of relationship for myself.

• Many young Black women hold dismal outlooks for their future love lives due to damaged, unstable past relationships in their lives and the lives of others around them.

• I believe collegiate women, especially Black women, could benefit from specialized relationship education.

To remain aware of my own judgments and biases, I reviewed this list prior to conducting interviews and reviewing my data. My goal was to consistently make myself conscious of my preconceptions in an effort to avoid overlooking or probing into statements from the participants that may support my own perceptions and ideas so that the participants’ descriptions are allowed to surface. Even though I was a member of this population at one point, I wanted to position myself as the student/learner and have the participant positioned as the participant/teacher giving me descriptions of their experiences (McCurdy, Spradley, & Shandy, 2005). I assessed my success in this realm through member checks discussed later in the chapter.
Data Collection

Sampling. Purposeful nonprobability sampling was utilized to make certain participants were able to share personal knowledge and experiences of the phenomenon under study (Sandelowski, 2000). Specifically, criterion sampling (Creswell, 2007) suggests that all individuals represent people who have experienced the phenomenon by meeting an established criterion. Sampling strategies for quantitative and qualitative research projects are distinct because the research goals are different. In quantitative research, random and representative sampling is needed to achieving applicability of research findings to larger populations across contexts. Quantitative research is built on the philosophical assumption that parts can be isolated out of context and then placed together to tell a story, albeit often fragmented. Conversely, qualitative approaches explore the parts that comprise a story. Whereas quantitative researchers desire generalizability, qualitative researchers achieve applicability of findings through thick, thorough description so that results are transferable to other settings. The researcher offers a thick description of the setting, circumstances, participants, and procedures, so that future researchers will be able to discern whether the findings can be applied to a new context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Inclusion criteria. The overarching research question for this study was “Through what pathways do young Black women construct their understanding of knowing and being in intimate relationships?” To appropriately address my research question, I identified key characteristics for eligibility to participate in the study. To be eligible to participate in this study, interested individuals had to be: (a) Black/African American, (b) female, (c) enrolled at the University of Kentucky, Kentucky State
University, or the University of Louisville as a full-time student, (d) a traditional student, (e) at least Junior classification status (f) nulliparous, (g) currently in an exclusive, intimate, heterosexual relationship that has lasted at least four months, and (h) able to articulate experiences verbally. I selected women who were enrolled in college for this study because I had entrée to this population and I was knowledgeable on gaining access to this population. Additionally, the research on this population in the context of the present topic is limited, so my hope was to make contribution to the empirical literature.

Criterion (c-f) provide a homogenous sample in terms of setting and age as well as educational and life course position. I believe women who have at least junior classification in college may be in a better position to speak about their experiences of being in an intimate relationship in college more so than first-year or second-year college women. Additionally, I desired participants who are currently in relationships because I believe that while they are in relationships, their thoughts and perceptions related to their experience would show up in their descriptions. I also anticipated the women may end their relationships during the data collection process, so the inclusion criteria related to relationship status stood for being recruited into the study, but not to remain in the study. I chose four months as the minimum relationship duration because relationships in young adulthood often experience a great deal of volatility and instability (Dailey, Pfiester, Jin, Beck & Clark, 2009; Meier & Allen, 2008). It is important to gain a holistic understanding of relationship processes even when relationships end or go through ‘on again/off again’ phases.
**Participant recruitment strategy.** Small samples are generally recommended for many qualitative approaches (Creswell, 1998). However, the burden lies with the researcher on choosing between breadth and depth (Patton, 2002). Patton (2002) states an appropriate sample size is dependent upon the questions being asked and the information desired, therefore, he asserts that “It depends” (p. 244). Since I favored depth in this initial phase of this research, my aim was to recruit 12-15 participants with the goal of securing 7-10 participants who met inclusion criteria. My purpose for ‘oversampling’ was to address attrition issues that may arise during the research process. Before recruiting participants, I received approval from the university Institutional Review Board (see Appendix A for approval letter). My final sample included 10 participants and I conducted one pilot interview as well. I placed other interested individuals on a contingency list so that I could contact them to participate in the study if I dropped below seven participants, but I did not need to use this list. I did not heavily recruit at the other two IRB-approved institutions because recruitment at my institution was sufficient.

The recruitment strategy included announcements, flyers, online social networking, and word of mouth. As a Black woman involved with campus life, I had entrée with the population being sampled on my campus. I personally announced the study at a few meetings on campus and some of my advisees would give their friends information about the study. Approved flyers were also posted on campus stating participation was needed for a study on couple relationships with the researcher’s contact information (see Appendix B for advertisement flyer). Announcements were also sent to online social networks, such as Facebook, announcing participants desired for a study on couple relationships. The research study was also advertised through my institution’s
research website. Fifty percent of my participants were recruited through participants already enrolled in the study. The other participants were recruited through public announcements and coming across flyers.

Interested individuals were directed to call or e-mail me to learn more information and determine eligibility. During initial contact, generally over the phone, participants were screened for eligibility by responding to a screening questionnaire (see Appendix C for screening questionnaire). If she met all criteria, the first interview was scheduled at a mutually agreed upon location where I met the potential participant, explained the study and confidentiality, and presented the informed consent form. At each initial meeting, I read the informed consent out loud and the potential participant was asked to read along. After, I asked if she would like to participate in the study. All interested individuals were enrolled in the study until I reached the desired sample size. All 10 participants enrolled in the study participated in all three face-to-face interviews and a follow-up interview. The women were compensated with a $25 gift card after the completion of the final face-to-face interview.

Participants. The final sample included 10 women. I made one exception to the eligibility criteria, which was including a participant who was ending her sophomore year. Table 3.1 depicts selected sample characteristics.
### Table 3.1

**Selected Sample Characteristics**

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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Length of Relationship</th>
<th>Parental Relationship Status</th>
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<td>Toya</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Int’l Studies</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Never Married</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup>Participants have been given pseudonyms for confidentiality purposes.

<sup>b</sup>Length of relationship is shown in months.

**Interviewing.** I interviewed each woman three times. At the initial interview, I explained the purpose of the study and explained how I anticipated interviews to progress. Ethical issues and the Institutional Review Board approval process were covered as well. The informed consent form covered study aims, recording procedures,
confidentiality, anonymity, and researcher and IRB contact information. Each participant was given a signed copy of their informed consent form (see Appendix D for informed consent form). I informed participants they did not have to respond to questions which made them feel uncomfortable and they could remove themselves from the study at any time. Participants were provided with a listing of campus and community resources, such as campus mental health and domestic violence services (see Appendix E for the listing).

**Interviews.** There are various options for data collection in human science research, such as observations, the use of personal documents, focus groups, and individual interviews. Long interviews are typically the standard for investigations related to personal experiences (Moustakas, 1994). To gain a full understanding of each participant’s experience, I selected the three-part, in-depth interview protocol developed by Dolbeare and Schuman (as cited and described in Seidman, 2006, p. 17). Seidman (1998) advises developing open-ended questions to use in the interviews. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) offer that entirely unstructured, open-ended interviewing may result in a shift in the primary focus of the research. Therefore, semi-structured interviewing provides a more suitable approach where interviewers are able to ask the same general questions in all of the interviews while allowing participants the ability to steer where emphasis should be placed in their narrative (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

Seidman’s approach is unique as it requires three separate interview guides each be developed for the participants. Each interview has a distinct purpose with respect to understanding a phenomenon or experience. Seidman (2006) describes the three-part interview series:

1." Interview One: Focused Life History: In the first interview, the interviewer’s task is to put the participant’s experiences in context by asking him or her to tell
as much as possible about him or herself in light of the topic up to the present time” (p. 17).

2. “Interview Two: The Details of Experience: The purpose of the second interview is to concentrate on the concrete details of the participants’ lived experience in the topic area of the study. We ask them to reconstruct these details” (p. 18).

3. “Interview Three: Reflection on the Meaning: In the third interview, we ask participants to reflect on the meaning of the experience…Making sense or making meaning requires that the participants look at how the factors in their lives interacted to bring them to their present situation” (p. 18).

This interview protocol was well-suited for the research question: Through what pathways do young Black women construct their understanding of knowing and being in intimate relationships? This model closely attends to context and how attitudes and perceptions develop over time, without which considering would leave limited opportunity for exploring the meaning and context of an experience (See Appendix F for interview protocol). In the first interview, we discussed the participant’s family background with emphasis on the relationship dynamics and relationship quality of their parents or parental figures as well as other significant people in their life. I also explored the messages participants may have received about developing intimate relationships from parental figures and other significant individuals in their life while growing up. Additionally, I asked participants to discuss their relationship history and how these relationships may have influenced their personal development and subsequent approach to intimate relationship development. Overall, I asked the participants to reconstruct their family and personal experiences with intimate relationships and talk with me about a range of events within their family, community, school, and relationship experiences that place their understanding of intimate relationships in context.
The goal of the second interview was having the participant to reconstruct the details of her current relationship. I wanted to gain insight into the dynamics of these relationships, the highs and lows, and how the relationship may have changed over time. For example, to gain a better understanding of these dynamics, I asked the participants to describe a typical day in their relationship from start to finish. I also explored context by asking the participants about to tell me about messages they receive from significant people in their lives and the various external forces they feel impact their relationships.

In the final interview, my task was having participants reflect on the meaning their experiences have for them. The questions asked and topics covered in this interview will allow the participants to reflect on their past and current experiences related to intimate couple relationships and how these experiences culminate to create meaning and personal definition for these women. We explored lessons they learned and how they made sense of their experiences. The women also shared advice they would offer other women like themselves based their experiences. Although the last interview is explicitly focused on meaning making, all three interviews explored the participants’ understanding of their experiences. In the final interview, participants also completed a demographic data sheet (see Appendix G for demographic data sheet).

As Seidman (2006) recommended, I scheduled 90 minutes for each individual interview. My goal was to allot adequate time for participants to reconstruct their experiences, place them into context, and reflect on the meanings these experiences have for them with respect to their understandings of intimate relationships. Interviews shorter than 90 minutes may not offer enough time for participants to give these reflective narratives (Seidman, 2006). Each participant varied in terms of how long they spoke...
with me in each interview. There were certain personality factors present, such as being reserved or outspoken, that contributed to the level at which participants elaborated on their experiences. Additionally, some of my participants found themselves at crossroads in their relationships, so they openly expressed themselves in the interview and talked a great deal about their emotions and personal challenges. On average, the interviews lasted one hour, fifteen minutes. In terms of spacing between interviews, Seidman (2006) suggested spacing interviews three days to one week apart. When scheduling interviews, I generally followed these structural recommendations, unless rescheduling was needed because other commitments or emergencies related to family, school, or work.

**Qualitative research with Black women.** As a Black woman, conducting this research with other Black women, I viewed my task seriously because I knew there would be implications from this work related to programming and future research. I knew I had to take care in interacting with these women and presenting their stories to both nonacademic and academic communities. Few, Stephens, and Rouse-Arnett (2003) caution that Black women who conduct qualitative research with other Black women should not assume ‘insider status.’ While we may share physical identities, often superficial, we must be mindful there are idiosyncrasies within our identities which have the ability to create moments of intimacy and distance (2003). Although, I had frequent contact with many Black female students on campus, I had to avoid presuming they would automatically feel comfortable disclosing sensitive narratives with me because we share racial identity.

The researchers also addressed the issue of hierarchy and social location. I was mindful of my clothing, hair, makeup and so forth because these decisions can affect the
researcher-participant dynamic. In the Black community, physical adornments offer political and cultural statements that frame the way we perceive each other (Few & Bell-Scott, 2002). Being a culturally competent researcher means you understand how to tailor your approach to reflect the values, worldviews, and preferences of your participants while maintaining the integrity of the research process (2003). Generally, I was casual in my dress, often very similar to what my participants wore to the interviews. I avoided flashy, loud makeup and jewelry as well as extremely dressy clothes, so attention would remain on our exchanges during the interview. During the interviews, I would also position my chair so that the space between us was equalized to minimize the feeling of hierarchy.

Another critical issue is self-disclosure from the researcher. Many qualitative approaches, such as phenomenology, for example, require the researcher to acknowledge and set aside personal knowledge and experience so the experiences of the participants are privileged. However, Few, Stephens, and Rouse-Arnett (2003) caution that minimal self-disclosure from the researcher may cause the participant to develop mistrust. When researchers are prompted by participants to self-disclose, the authors suggest redirecting the conversation to the topic while following the participant's lead and her need to articulate her thoughts and feelings. They also offer that exercising sincerity, honesty, and respect help to establish rapport, trust, and insider status with participants. When I had someone in common with a participant, such as growing up in the same hometown or being a similar fellowship program, I mentioned this to her. After an interview ended and I stopped recording, some of my participants would talk further about issues discussed in
the interview and I would gladly welcome these off-the-record conversations. I believe instances such as these helped to build rapport with the women participating in this study.

**Data Analysis**

This section outlines the step-by-step description of my data analysis strategies. I used several data analysis strategies to arrive at the final conclusions for this study. Although I did not follow any existing analysis method in its entirety, I systemically incorporated widely used strategies into the analysis I believed followed a thoughtful, reflective, thorough treatment of the data.

Data analysis commenced immediately after the first interview was completed. I engaged in interim analysis to determine if the interview protocol should be adjusted and to correct possible errors in the field (Miles & Huberman, 1994). During each interview, I wrote field notes as I listened to the participants. After each interview, I would review the field notes while listening to the interviews, and write them up in a separate document. In my write-up, I would also include my reflections on methodological and conceptual considerations on a weekly basis. These reflections included my thoughts about the information my participants were sharing with me and the study’s progress. Before I began my first interview, I wrote my thoughts about the study and starting the interviews. Additionally, by reviewing my field notes and listening to the recorded interviews, I would make decisions concerning interview style and interview questions. For example, I felt my first interview was shorter than I anticipated, so I reviewed Patton’s (2002) techniques for gaining optimal information from participants during interviews. I used these techniques in subsequent interviews. Also, I added a few questions to the interview guide that would allow me gather richer information regarding conceptual issues relevant to the research question.
In my dissertation proposal, I stated that I would transcribe each interview verbatim. I had intended to be the only transcriber. However, as this task became more and more time consuming, I arranged for professional transcription. All interviews were transcribed. As a quality assurance check, I listened to all the interviews to correct mistakes and inaudible words or phrases. Additionally, as each interview was transcribed, I read each transcript several times line by line to familiarize myself with the data. I read and reread all three interview transcripts for each participant together and I also read the ten transcripts of each of the three rounds of interviews together. By reading the three interviews from each participant, I wanted to gain a preliminary profile of each participant and the major issues and themes surfacing from their unique experiences and descriptions. By reading all of the transcripts from each round of interviews together, I wanted to see what preliminary patterns and themes were developing across all the participants according to that particular interview and the questions posed therein.

With the highlight feature in Microsoft word, I highlighted all relevant passages in the transcripts. After highlighting each interview, I reread the highlighted statements again and began writing notes in the margins (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Throughout the data collection and data analysis, I also wrote memos about ideas related to the interview questions, the purpose of the project, and the emerging patterns and themes. These memos were written in the field notes, in the transcript margin notes, in the contact summaries, as well as anywhere else accessible to me when ideas came to mind.

For each interview, I completed a contact summary sheet (see Appendix H for contact summary form template), which served as an initial phase of data reduction (Miles & Huberman, 1994). A contact summary sheet is a one-page form with focusing and
summarizing questions about a field contact (Miles & Huberman, 1994). As I reviewed my field notes, listened to interviews, and read transcripts, I answered questions on the contact summary form to summarize the main points in the contact. I used the contact summary forms to highlight main issues, suggest new and revised codes and to reorient myself to the contact when reviewing transcripts and writing participant profiles. I also used the contact summary when discussing patterns and themes from the data to share with the critical colleague working with me on confirming emerging themes and patterns from the study. The contact summary forms were especially helpful to me when writing participant profiles, finalizing coding categories, and developing the thematic presentation (see Appendix I for a contact summary form example).

In the early stages of analysis, I created a codebook that included coding categories. My codebook was initially developed deductively with a priori coding categories derived from the research question, the relevant literature, and the three interview guides. As the study progressed the coding categories became data-derived as additional categories emerged inductively from the data. Qualitative description holds that codes are data-derived, meaning they are generated from the data gained from participants, therefore, codes emerging from the data took precedence over the pre-existing codes I developed initially (Sandelowski, 2000).

The final codebook was largely comprised of major coding categories based largely on the interview questions and resulting participant responses. When revising the codebook, I added coding categories and sub-codes based on reading transcripts and referring back to contact summaries. In the final codebook, however, I decided to condense sub-codes in several coding categories. I consulted with a critical colleague about the categories in the
codebook and we decided for the purposes of my project major coding categories would be more useful to me because I wanted to begin the next layer of analysis after extracting all coded text. For example, one coding category was *Peer Relationship Guidance*. This category had several sub-codes, so I decided to use one broad code to identify dialogue in the transcripts where women were offering advice to their peers. I wanted to use my codebook primarily to easily identify and categorize the relevant data, so that I could begin more advanced analysis with sufficiently organized text. I relied on the data displays I created later to identify meaning units and themes in the narratives. The codebook included the title of each coding category, the definition of the coding category and an exemplar(s) from the text reflecting the coding category. These coding categories were color-coded sentences and passages were highlighted based on the associated code. I also used the Comment feature in Microsoft Word to label passages with the coding category and to write margin notes.

Sandelowski (2000) recommends qualitative content analysis as the most appropriate analysis strategy for qualitative description studies. When engaging in qualitative content analysis, the researcher engages manifest content analysis as well as latent content analysis. Manifest content analysis refers to textural material, such as words, phrases, descriptors, and terms central to the topic under study. In qualitative content analysis, the researcher decides the unit of analysis that will be divided into units of meaning. I used individual themes as units of analysis. These themes were expressed mostly through sentences and passages in the text. I quantified these meaning units by counting responses as well as the number participants in each response category. When I found themes that were particularly salient throughout a participant’s interviews, but not
necessarily with all participants, I decided whether the theme should be included in the final analysis. With latent content analysis, I moved beyond the numerical prevalence of meaning units and focused on the meaning within each passage of text.

To facilitate both the manifest and latent content analysis, I created a data display. A data display is an organized structure of information that allows a researcher to draw conclusions and take actions in regard to presenting the data. The data display offered me a compilation of information and data in an immediately accessible, condensed form so that I could see what was happening in the data and draw conclusions. I placed all of the meaning units, which were mostly passages of coded text I deemed relevant, into an Excel spreadsheet. Each row in the data display included the coding category, the participant code, the margin note associated with the passage, the learning pathway or experience stated or inferred in the passage, and the passage. This display was a part of my analysis, not separate from it. Designing the rows and columns for the displays and deciding which data should be included in each cell was an analytic activity. I decided on the content of the data display based on my research question. I reviewed the data display to determine patterns, themes, and subthemes to finalize the descriptive structure of the findings.

To complete the qualitative description, I provided a thorough, detailed summary of the relevant findings in a thematic presentation (Sandelowski, 2000). I used the methods the described above to create a qualitative description of the pathways through which Black collegiate women construct their understanding of knowing and being intimate relationships. The qualitative description is presented in Chapter Four.
Researcher as instrument

Due to the human dimension of qualitative work, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis. As the researcher, I was able to exercise flexibility in various stages of my research process. Possessing this flexibility inherently creates a limitation in the research attributable to the risk of researcher subjectivity and bias. As the researcher, I had to be consistently mindful of the thoughts and feelings that came to me while I was collecting and analyzing the data I gained from the participants for several reasons: a) I am a Black woman; b) I was somewhat close in age to my participants; c) I was matriculating at the same university setting as my participants, but as a graduate student; d) I attended the same institution as my participants as an undergraduate student; e) I was in an exclusive relationship for most of my time as an undergraduate student; f) I am particularly knowledgeable about the necessary elements of healthy relationship development based on research; and g) I feel strongly about Black women and young women developing healthy relationships and avoiding relationships that are abusive and detrimental to their well-being.

Interviewing the participants in my study was an amazing experience for me. Interestingly, I saw some aspect of myself in each of the participants when I was at their stage in development. There were several instances during the interviews where I felt compassion and sympathy for some of the participants particularly when they shared moments in their relationships that caused them disappointment and sadness. Conversely, there were many moments when I was thrilled to hear the participants, for example, talk about the importance of self-love or learning from past experiences. During these moments, I simply wrote my thoughts down on paper to release them on some level and remembered my role as a researcher.
I feel a sense of responsibility to this population and to young Black women in general, so it was a challenge not to offer words of empowerment and wisdom when I clearly sensed some of them were in situations that compromised their well-being. Because I saw glimpses of myself in the personal stories the participants shared with me, internally, I felt compelled to share as well and to engage in dialogue about certain experiences. However, my methodology did not allow for excessive sharing of information from the researcher. Even though I was not able to offer any guidance to the participants, several participants did mention to me that the interviews prompted them to engage in self-reflection. Some of them had not given much thought to certain questions I asked, so they told me they thought about our conversations between interviews and probed themselves about the reasoning behind their relationship behaviors. A few weeks after her final interview, Tayva emailed me to thank me for allowing her to participate in my study because of the insight she gained as a result. In her email, she said:

I just wanted to say thank you for allowing me to participate in your study and I hope that the information I provided will be able to help you in your research. I just want to say thank you! Speaking with you and answering the questions was really helpful for me. It allowed me to think about things that had been on my mind for awhile and to think about them more in depth. I left each session thinking what I told you and the questions you asked me that I could not really think of an answer and all of this had a positive effect on me. So, I just want to say thank you again. It was just really helpful for me and I don't know if I did not participate if I would be where I am right now. It was wonderful meeting with you and you made the interview really relaxing and inviting. Good luck on your research and I wish you the best in the future.

Receiving this email was evidence to me that my study was meaningful. On the contrary, this email also caused me to reflect on my interviewing style because it was not my intention to produce this type of effect on the participants. However, I confirmed that my
line of questioning was not therapeutic in nature by listening to my audio recordings, but that self-reflection was simply a by-product of the interviewing process.

In order to address the potential bias that could influence my data collection and data analysis, I engaged in a number of validation strategies, explained in the following section, to make certain that voices of my participants were the focal point of the study.

**Trustworthiness**

Evaluation of sound research design is inherently different for qualitative and quantitative inquiry because the goals of the research are different. However, there are parallels identified for both sides of inquiry that assess sound research design. Lincoln and Guba (1985) articulated criteria appropriate for assessing the validity and reliability of qualitative research design through achieving trustworthiness. Specifically, Lincoln and Guba (1985) presented four components to assess the soundness or trustworthiness of a qualitative research study. These include credibility, confirmability, transferability, and dependability. Credibility speaks to the assurance that the data speaks to the findings reported. Transferability implies generalizability of findings from the study to other settings, situations, or populations. Transferability is determined by the ability of another researcher to reconstruct a study when there are similar contexts and populations being explored. Dependability is the parallel to reliability. To achieve dependability, the research process should be transparent and visible through a description provided by the researcher.

To judge the quality of a qualitative descriptive study, Sandelowski (2000) suggests researchers should seek descriptive validity and interpretive validity. Descriptive validity refers to an accurate account of events that most other people would agree is true. Interpretive validity is producing an accurate account of the meaning participants
attributed to events that the participants would agree reflects their intended meaning. Descriptive validity and interpretive validity mirror the goals of credibility and confirmability. There are several procedures a researcher may engage in achieve trustworthiness in study. I used validation strategies outlined by Creswell (2007). He describes eight strategies and recommends qualitative researchers use at least two of them in their research design. I used four of these procedures at some point in my study to meet the trustworthiness criteria described above. These strategies often overlap in addressing the criteria above, so I described each strategy independently.

**Clarifying researcher bias.** Clarifying the research bias is important to the readers of a study, so that they understand the researcher’s position and any biases or opinions that may influence the research process. This strategy requires the researcher to discuss their past experiences, biases, and assumptions that may or have shaped their perspective and approach to the study (Creswell, 1998). Earlier in the chapter, I discussed my thoughts and experiences related to the topic and the assumptions I hold regarding Black women in intimate relationships.

**Thick description.** To increase trustworthiness of a study, Creswell (2007) recommends researchers provide a sufficiently rich description of the setting, participants, procedures, and interactions, so the parameters of the study are well specified. Providing a thick description can address credibility and transferability. I wanted to ensure I presented the data in way that was true to the voice and intent of the participants. As I developed the final qualitative description, I used the words of the participants when labeling meaning units and developing thematic categories. With qualitative descriptive studies, the researcher is supposed to stay close to the words of the
participants (Sandelowski, 2000). I included direct quotations throughout the final description. I attempted to preserve the ‘voice’ of the language of my participants by not removing fillers from the quotations. To illustrate, if a participant used the words ‘like’ or ‘you know’ while talking with me, I kept those words and fillers in the exemplars included in the final description. Additionally, I also wanted to provide a thick description of the research process so that other practitioners or researchers are able to determine if their circumstances or findings could be generalized or applied to findings from my study provided the context is similar. I described my methods in detail so that any reader would be able trace my methodological steps. To further accomplish transferability, I created participant profiles that provided in-depth information about each participant.

**Member checks.** I conducted member checks to achieve both confirmability and credibility of my findings. A member check is done to solicit participants’ views of the accuracy of the researcher’s interpretations and conclusions drawn from the data. I created participant profiles for each participant outlining their background and salient themes unique to their experience. Each participant was emailed her profile in an attachment. In the email message, a description of the profile was described and the participant was asked to read through the profile and to honestly respond to me with comments, corrections, questions, suggestions, and reactions. I told each participant that it was important that I accurately capture their experiences, thoughts, and feelings. All of the participants responded positively regarding the profiles. For example, one participant, Charlene, said, “You did a great job summarizing our convo!” She also gave me minor corrections about a few things mentioned in the profile. Another participant, Brittany
said, “I thought the write up was very accurate. I thought most everything that was
mentioned was correct.” In response to findings sent to participants to review, Brittany
offered:

I believe that this chapter from your dissertation was great! I think it accurately
depicted what took place in our interview and it was also very enlightening to
read about the messages and ideas that you received through the other interviews.
I think that the information was very well organized. Each section was divided up
according to a particular theme and each excerpt from the interviews flowed very
well according to what theme it fell under. I think it was great...
I also consulted with participants to determine the accuracy of themes presented
in the final qualitative description. I sent the final written narrative to participants
through email. Via follow up telephone conversations and emails, participants were able
confirm the themes and categories in the qualitative description represented the pathways
through which they learn to approach intimate relationships. As an added check on my
representation of the data, I also discussed the findings with a member of this population
who did not participate in the study. Alicia, who is a senior at the same institution, said
the findings touched her. She overwhelmingly identified with the themes I identified.
Alicia told me the work was important to improving positive personal and relationship
development among collegiate Black women. By conducting member checks, I was able
to reduce threats to trustworthiness as I received feedback from participants about my
interpretations and descriptions of the information they shared with me.

**Peer feedback.** Peer feedback or peer debriefing offers an external check of the
research design. Creswell (1998) states securing peer feedback mimics interrater
reliability in quantitative research. In addition to sharing my methodology with my
dissertation chairperson, I also shared my data collection and data analysis procedures
with a critical colleague I believed would give me unbiased, honest feedback about my
study. My critical colleague is a member of my doctoral program cohort and she also has qualitative research training. Early on, we discussed the purpose of my study and why I chose this topic for my dissertation. Discussing my thoughts with her helped me to solidify my research questions and topics I wanted to cover with participants. I solicited her feedback on my interview guides and added specific questions after thinking about her suggestions. While I was interviewing participants, I would talk with her about issues we discussed and patterns that were emerging. When I developed my initial codebook, I shared the codebook and transcripts with her. She read through three transcripts while looking over the coding categories. We discussed the coding scheme and established consensus on the final coding categories I would use to code all the interviews. As I was finalizing themes, I would also discuss my interpretations of the data with my critical colleague. I gave the critical colleague a write up outlining themes to receive feedback on the accuracy and logic of the presentation. These conversations allowed me to hear a different viewpoint and to consider new angles for the emerging themes.

I also consulted with other individuals in higher education and in my peer network. One of my colleagues holds advanced degrees in the public health field. She is also a Black woman, so she was able to provide feedback from a personal and academic perspective. This peer was also able to identify with several of the themes from the study through her own personal experiences and observations of other Black female peers and friends. I also had another peer, Richard, an ordained minister working on an advanced degree in theology, review the findings. He was able to draw from his experiences as a Black, unmarried, heterosexual male and his experiences working with his congregation and in this community when offering his feedback. He was able to provide his male
perspective on the findings based on his experiences with Black women. Interestingly, he told me he felt a substantial number of Black women are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder in the area of intimate relationships. Richard shared, “The pain from previous relationships can be so severe that these women—much like soldiers returning home from war—are not able to relate in healthy ways to those around them.” Two of my girlfriends with whom I attended college also reviewed the work and the themes overwhelmingly resonated with them as well. One girlfriend wrote this comment about the findings:

This is really good, interesting and kind of sad so far…I think that we have all seen each situation or been in one of the situations at some point in our lives. The saddest one to me is Tayva…Simply because she realizes that she's sacrificing who she is for a man and it makes her sad, but she doesn't want to leave the situation. That's pretty disturbing.

Limitations to methodology. In regard to methodology, there are a few limitations of the present study I identified. Initially, I planned to have two coders code the transcripts. I would be one of these coders. The other coder would code only a portion of the transcripts and then we would determine our level of agreement and I would make necessary adjustments. However, both individuals I recruited to assist in the coding were unable to participate in this component of the research. One of these coders did review the codebook as well as a few of the transcripts. After she read through the transcripts while simultaneously referring to codes, we discussed her suggestions and I made necessary adjustments to coding book. This part of the data analysis could have been strengthened by having a colleague actually label the relevant statements with the codes instead of only reviewing the codes and the relevant statements. By doing this, I could
have calculated an actual level of agreement above and beyond our verbal consensus of the codes.
Chapter Four: Findings

This chapter provides a descriptive summary of the pathways through which young Black collegiate women form their understanding of knowing and being in intimate relationships. The women in this study shared a wealth of information with me, however, I decided to focus on presenting moments in their narratives where they discussed points of learning, reflecting, or appraising in various experiences related to the construction of their attitudes and behaviors regarding intimate relationships. Chenail (1995) suggests concentrating on one aspect of your study so the presentation of findings can be data-rich. In my decision to winnow my data, I considered the themes and patterns which spoke best to the research question: *Through what pathways do young, Black, collegiate women construct their understanding of knowing and being in intimate relationships?*

Through interviews with participants, I was able to identify three main pathways that influence or inform the manner in which the participants think about intimate relationship development and behave within intimate relationships. These pathways included (a) direct communication about intimate relationships (b) observations of intimate relationships in the participant’s environment, and (c) personal experiences in intimate relationships. From each of these pathways, participants reflected on information seen, heard, or experienced and discussed the impact of the information or lack thereof on their personal standpoint and interactional approach connected to intimate relationships. I noticed patterns connected to the pathways from which I was able to create the thematic presentation.
While analyzing the data in this study, the goal was to stay close to the words of the participants and avoid engaging in high level interpretation of the data as dictated by qualitative description guidelines (Sandelowski, 2000). When forming the theme titles, I used direct quotes from participant interviews as much as possible. I also provided exemplars from participant interviews to elucidate the themes given in the following qualitative description. The themes follow an organized re-presentation of the data that seem to best fit the narratives given by the participants.

The narratives and direct quotes presented in this chapter are personal and sensitive. In order to protect the identities of the participants, I have given each participant a pseudonym. Other identifying information and the names of friends, family, and intimate partners have also been changed (see Appendix J for a profile of each participant). To elucidate the richness and depth of each participant’s experiences for the reader, the profiles highlight the experiences and descriptions salient to each participant. In the remainder of this chapter, I will describe the pathways which influence the attitudes and behaviors of these women regarding intimate relationships. Then, I will present themes I identified from these pathways. I decided to present themes separate from the pathways because many of the themes I discovered in the data had origins in multiple pathways. Table 4.1 provides a listing of the themes and the associated pathway sources applicable to each theme.
Table 4.1

Themes and Associated Pathways Sources of Influence

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<tr>
<th>Theme Subthemes</th>
<th>Pathway Source</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Direct Communication</td>
<td>Observational Pathway</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pathway</td>
<td>Personal Experience</td>
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<tr>
<td>Revering self</td>
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<tr>
<td>You’re a princess</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Put myself first</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning yourself</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Speaking your mind</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Not right off the bat</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sex…if have you to</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Be friends first</td>
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<td>Equally yoked</td>
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<td></td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Through thick and thin</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coming to a solution</td>
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<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No wool over my eyes</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
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Pathway Sources

**Direct communication.** Participants discussed several messages they received mostly from their parents or primary caregivers related to developing intimate relationships, mate selection, and sex. Through impromptu conservations or sit down talks, parents communicated messages they felt would benefit their daughters in the long run. For some participants, parental messages were powerful influences on their attitudes and behaviors toward forming intimate relationships. However, some participants processed the guidance given to them and formed their own standpoint on the subject. Every participant said their parents or primary caregiver gave them some advice on relationships, men or sex, despite some of these messages being short or seemingly ineffective to the participant. When speaking about their parents or primary caregiver, the participants would use statements, such as “She always told me….” or “…my dad always said I need…” or “I feel like my parents want…”. Participants either adopted their
parents’ messages as their own or these messages provided a foundation for them to form their own perspective. When reviewing the messages participants discussed with me, I identified patterns among the participants’ recollections of their parents’ or caregivers’ messages.

**Observation.** During our interviews, many participants expressed they learned a great deal about intimate relationships through observation. They primarily observed the intimate relationships of their parents or primary caregivers. However, participants also discussed observing relationships in their kin networks and peer networks. Kin networks included aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, and fictive kin. In their kin networks, participants often discussed their grandparents’ marriages, which offered compelling demonstrations of commitment. In regard to peer networks, participants generally talked about their girlfriends’ relationships. Participants would tell me stories about their girlfriends’ relationships and say things like, “Just like watching my friends in relationships and things, I feel like…” or “I wish some of my friends would just…”. By reflecting on the relationships around them, participants were able to pinpoint positive and negative relationship characteristics based on the level of satisfaction and happiness they observed in these relationships. Participants shared what characteristics they wanted to adopt as well as the ones they wanted to avoid. These observations not only provided models and ‘nonmodels’ of healthy relationships, but they also reinforced the participants’ feelings related to how they are supposed take care of themselves in a relationship. From watching the manner in which their girlfriends behaved in relationships, some solidified their opinions related to preserving their self-identity. Additionally, participants were able to articulate relationship advice and relationship
educational needs for other Black collegiate women based on their own experiences, but also from appraising their girlfriends’ situations.

**Personal experience.** Throughout our interviews, participants discussed their past and present relationships. In the process of beginning a relationship, maintaining a relationship, or ending a relationship, participants discussed reflecting on these experiences in an effort to improve their relationships or their personal well-being. This reflection was revealed in statements such as, “I guess it taught me…”, “I think I’ve learned that it’s okay to…”, or “…that was a mistake I made several times and I wish I hadn't done that.” Participants discussed the value of reflecting on personal experiences to avoid negative situations in the future. Most often, the participants who experienced painful, disappointing experiences discussed changing their approach to relationships in regard to their attitude and their behavior in order to experience better outcomes. Sharing their narratives and thoughts in the interviews also allowed them to reflect on their personal experiences. Several participants told me they thought about something we discussed which had an impact on their perceptions of themselves and their relationships as well as future actions in their relationships.

**The Thematic Presentation**

**Revering self: Acknowledging your importance.** Throughout the interviews, the participants made references to the importance of preserving their self-worth, their self-identity, and their personal desires. Many of the women received messages from their primary caregivers regarding their value as an individual. Some of the women learned through experience that making certain your priorities are addressed before those of an intimate partner is necessary for their personal happiness and successfully handling the business of academics and personal goals. The women often discussed the detrimental
outcomes of excessive self-sacrifice on their lives and the lives of women around them. For these women, revering yourself in an intimate relationship embodied the notion of maintaining their identity in a relationship and continuing to acknowledge and fulfill their goals and their desires despite their relationship status. The following subthemes expound on this main theme.

**You’re a princess: Cultivating self-esteem and self-agency.** Several participants in this study received messages from their parents intended to foster positive self-esteem and self-agency in their daughters. Parents, particularly mothers, felt having a positive self-esteem was important in the context of developing intimate relationships. By communicating messages such as, “You’re a princess,” and “Don’t settle for less,” parents wanted to brighten the prism through which these women viewed themselves. Mothers affirmed their daughter’s right to make their own choices and voice their opinions in intimate relationships. They wanted their daughters to develop a sense of agency in their relationships so their daughters could feel free to communicate their thoughts and also become active agents in their personal happiness. For example, Jalia’s mom encouraged her to be open to voicing her thoughts and feelings to her partner without any fear. Her mother also expressed to her that she could make her own decision about when she should marry. Jalia said:

…she was like…you don't have to rush, you don't have to think you have to get married at some age to have to have a kid at some age. She's like you do it when you're ready, when you’re comfortable and when you know it’s right.

With this message, her mother was conveying that Jalia is in control of the timing of events in her life course. Tayva’s mother told her to make sure she preserved her identity
in a relationship and maintained equality between her and an intimate partner. Tayva explained her mother’s advice on protecting her self-identity in a relationship:

(She told her) Pretty much to be happy and... feel like you’re still yourself, not just have... your identity go away. I guess to like have control. I guess like not let the guy, you know, take over everything and pretty much like you do as he says type thing. I mean, it should pretty much be a partnership, you know, it shouldn’t be all one side. I think the main part was just to be happy, you know, ‘cause you don’t wanna’ be in something where you’re not happy that eats away at yourself and then you just don’t be yourself anymore.

This advice was especially salient to Tayva’s current situation with her boyfriend. Tayva desired marriage and children in the future and her boyfriend, TaShaun, had told her he did not want to marry or have children. At one point Tayva considered foregoing her strong desire for family to stay with her boyfriend long-term. Over time, she realized she was sacrificing her own happiness to maintain this relationship. Tayva acknowledged she was holding her feelings in at the expense of her own happiness, which her mother had always advised her against doing in a relationship.

Brittany’s mom also encouraged her daughter to preserve her sense of self in a relationship. In addition, Brittany’s mom consistently tried to instill in Brittany high self-worth so that she would not settle for negative treatment in a relationship. Brittany remembered her mother telling her to prioritize herself over her partner in a relationship:

She always told me... don’t feel like you’re pressured. She always was like you’re a princess, don’t take anything... less. You know, you’re worth more than whatever, so don’t ever like settle. Just be aware. know that you have, you’re everything, so you shouldn’t have to like feel like you have to put up with someone... for whatever reason. Just feel like you deserve the best, so that’s what you should get. She’s given me a lot of advice; I don’t even know where to begin.... She just really drove into me to not settle. That’s just such a big deal to her. You know, don’t feel like you have to give into someone because of what they want. Always like, just always know who you are and don’t lose yourself in guys, or you know.
She said she “Absolutely” listened to her mom’s advice. Brittany seemed to internalize these self-affirming messages. She also believed other Black collegiate women should be taught the importance of self-love as well as the danger in self-sacrifice when done for an intimate partner. Participants felt the notion of not settling or tolerating unhealthy or unfulfilling relationships was important to their mothers. Another participant, Charlene, told me about a moment where her mom questioned her about continuing to deal with a boyfriend who seemed to make her unhappy. Charlene’s mom let her know she deserved happiness in a relationship. Charlene recounted the moment for me:

Last time I had like a real conversation with my mom is over Christmas break. We (Charlene and her boyfriend) had some type of argument about New Years, and she overheard, and I was talking to her about it, I can’t remember like verbatim, but basically she was saying you know, ‘why do you put up with it?’ Not necessarily encouraging me to break up or leave him alone, but it was like if this is something that you don’t tolerate, and it makes you upset, because I don’t like seeing you upset, why do you put up with it?... It was the whole, why do you put up with it and she’ll be like, ‘you should be with somebody that makes you happy all the time. Not necessarily spoils you and does each and everything you want to do, but generally makes you happy’.

Charlene said she knew her mother was right. She actually wished her mother had given her similar advice when she entered her teenage years. Because Charlene’s mom was incarcerated during all of Charlene’s high school years and the early part of college, she felt she missed out on the type of advice she needed to steer clear of unhealthy relationships. She said she did not have a caring adult to talk to about her relationship issues. Her grandmother, who acted as the primary caregiver for Charlene and her siblings, simply advised Charlene not to have boyfriend until she graduated from college. Although she appreciated her mother’s advice, she felt it came too late because she had already established patterns in her behavior.
Put myself first: Prioritizing self before intimate partners. Through my discussions with some of the women, I sensed many of them learned their priorities should come before their relationship and partner. Some learned they should put themselves first in a relationship through previous relationship experiences where their priorities were suppressed and pushed aside to maintain a relationship with a partner. Putting yourself first is also related to limiting self-sacrifice in a relationship, so that your goals and priorities can still be addressed. When participants had censored their own needs and wants to satisfy her partner, they discussed negative effects of doing so on their emotional health and their happiness.

Some participants received messages about putting themselves first in a relationship. For example, Brittany’s mom told her to, “Do what you have to do for yourself first and love yourself first before you try to love anyone else or do for someone else.” Another, participant, Charlene learned the negative consequences of prioritizing her partner above herself. She told me she had created a pattern of being there for her boyfriend all of time, so over time he expected her to drop everything for him when he needed her. She said she sharpened her time management skills in a sense as a result of this relationship because she had to learn to balance all of his needs as well as her own needs. She also realized she could have spent her time more wisely. When I asked Charlene what she learned in this relationship, she reflected:

…time management in a sense of getting it all done or getting it done early or something like that, but then not so much time management because maybe I should’ve stayed home a few of those nights to study for those exams or to work on those papers. I think in the beginning my downfall was letting him know that I’m just so available whenever he’s ready, and that was the whole first semester, and then when he decided that he needed space…So I think early on in the relationship he had established, ‘well I guess things are just going to happen whenever I want them to happen, so might as well keep going along with it.’ So
it’s kind of like I’m fighting an uphill battle because this is how it’s always been, and now all of a sudden I’m realizing that it’s not okay.

Charlene candidly shared her struggles with being with someone and loving someone she consistently placed first in her life, while she always felt she came second in his life.

Charlene said “I feel like I put him first so many times that in return it’s not been the same.” Over time, she began to realize she needed to do things differently in their relationship. Charlene described her importance to her boyfriend:

…you want to say you got frat stuff to do right now or you gotta’ work or you got poetry stuff or you got this, that and the other. And, I’m like well, okay, you have your priorities that you want to put in place, put 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 order and Charlene always has to come last, you are not about to come first with me, not at all.

She was considering cutting her boyfriend completely off, so she actively thought about things she was going to start doing differently. She acknowledged placing her boyfriend first in her life caused her to juggle her schedule around and compromised her happiness.

In the future, she said she wanted to put herself first:

…I do think that I want to make sure that I do know, what’s important to me happens first. I need to know that…when I’m doing an assignment or doing a project, or if I have something planned, ‘No, Charlene you have something planned, don’t try to miss and figure him in there. If you have something planned that day, you need to be there at a certain time, then you need to be there at a certain time and he’s got to decide something else to do.’ I feel like I have to bend over backwards and make it work so he’s happy, but I’m left unhappy at the end of the day because I’m not getting what I want.

Because of her experiences, Charlene said she would advise other Black women to put themselves first in a relationship. She offered this piece of advice based on her experiences:

When you’re first meeting the guy, do not make yourself too available. Do not always, when he’s ready, ‘you want to go out, you want to do this, you want to do that’ – ‘no.’ I would say on purpose go ‘no I can’t do it this day but how about this day?’ Because when you set that up in the beginning that anytime he asks you to go out, it’s like you’re just waiting on him. Waiting on him whenever he’s
ready, and it sets up a bad pattern because later on it’s like it’s going to get old, because when you want to do stuff and most times he’s going to say “No, I can’t do it now”, it’s a breeze for them to say no… Everett would say no, but if they know that your time is just as valuable as their time, then they would be more up to being just as flexible as you are.

While Charlene had placed her priorities second to her boyfriend, another participant, Tayva, pushed her expectations for a relationship aside to stay with her boyfriend. She desired marriage and family in her future and long-term, but her boyfriend told her he did not want to marry or have children. Tayva thought he might change his mind at some point, but over time, she realized the sincerity in his decision. She even considered foregoing marriage and children to stay in her relationship. Tayva acknowledged the confusion and sadness she felt as a result of wanting to stay in a relationship where she knew was not going to get what she wanted:

Tayva: …I think it was more of maybe starting to be an eye-opener of me…I guess, putting his feelings over mine, more of forgetting what’s important to me.

AS: Explain that for me.

Tayva: I guess it just goes back to the whole marriage thing, just I know that it was important to me, but I still wanted to be with him and make him happy. So it was more of, well I’ll consider, you know, not doing that. I mean I really thought about considering not getting married. I mean I was so happy then, and then more towards probably the last four months, I think I’ve gotten sad, just the fact that I think it’s coming closer to graduation and I realize that what I want and what I’m in right now isn’t gonna’ fulfill that. I mean I’m happy to be with him, but at the same time I think it just kinda’ makes me sad.

Tayva told me the situation makes her sad often and her eyes become glossed over when she talks about it. In our final interview, Tayva reflected on her relationship with TaShaun and the choices she had made over time. I asked her if she felt she had made any sacrifices in her relationships. She said:
AS: What, if any, sacrifices do you feel that you have made in the past, or you are currently making right now to be in your relationship?

Tayva: I would probably say just my beliefs on things…It kinda’ goes back to the whole meeting that partner that you wanna’ spend your life with. So with me, I guess, I’m kinda’ going against that just ‘cause I’m in a relationship where it’s not really gonna’ happen. So, I think at the moment I’m kinda’ sacrificing that, it’s more of a stop in my goals.

AS: So you’re sacrificing what you want?
Tayva: Yes.

AS: To be with him? How does that make you feel?

Tayva: It makes me sad, it kinda’ makes me wonder why I do it.

AS: Why do you think you do it...

Tayva: I think it’s mostly just ‘cause I do care about him so much and I think it’s just kinda’ one of those things where I hold on to ‘well maybe his mind will change so I’ll just give it…some more time and time…keep saying…to myself, ‘You know, oh he’ll change.’

Owing to her own experiences, Tayva believed other women should find a relationship that is meaningful to them and that meets the majority of the expectations that are important to them.

Another participant, Brittany felt strongly about prioritizing herself above her partner. She told me that she did not want to sacrifice anything to be in her relationship other than making general concessions to maintain equilibrium in her relationship:

I really try not to like sacrifice. I don’t wanna’ feel like I have to sacrifice anything…besides like compromising on like small things I feel like I shouldn’t have to sacrifice anything that I’m truly committed to to be in this relationship. Either you accept it or not. I feel like I don’t really make any major sacrifices. Yeah, I don’t think I make any. I was trying to think if I do, but I don’t think I do.

I asked Brittany if she knew any of her friends who made sacrifices to be in a relationship. She said she sees a lot of her friends give up what they want to do in life to be in a relationship. She shared a story about one of her girlfriends who left college to move away with her boyfriend:

I think like my friend who has the baby, I think she sacrificed her future because..he still got to go – he was in the navy – so he still got to go and go off to
sea or whatever and do his thing, but she had to stay home and put her education on hold until he came back to take care of the kids. I feel like she sacrificed that...I think you shouldn’t do that just because of one person and you don’t even know anybody where you’re going, all you have is him. So they sacrifice their independence in that way too I think.

Brittany’s unwillingness to sacrifice was demonstrated in her decisions related to selecting a graduate program. She said her boyfriend was a secondary consideration in her decision in regard to proximity to him. Ella, another participant who was also planning to attend professional school upon graduating, held a similar view. She admitted she would be sad moving away from her boyfriend, but being away from him would never cause her to decide against entering her program. I asked Ella about her decision to leave for professional school despite being separated from her boyfriend. She responded:

I guess because it’s important for me to accomplish my goals and not let anything hold me back. Even if it is like an important relationship to me, ‘cause I feel like if it’s that important, then it will endure anything.

Nichelle also shared a comparable perspective on putting personal goals and priorities above your partner’s priorities. She said she would not allow her relationship to unduly compromise her academic achievement or anything she wanted to do in her life:

I don’t let my relationship stop me from doing anything that I want to do. Schoolwise, I don’t let my relationship get in the middle of that at all. I am going to do what I have to do. Sometimes if I am upset, I know I don’t have to deal with it, I am committed to the relationship, but I don’t have a signed paper.

These women learned along the way it is important for them to prioritize their goals and expectations in a relationships. Some of the women described being mindful of limiting self-sacrifice in their relationships. Even though a few of the struggled with making sure their needs and desired are addressed before their partner’s, these women confirmed the importance of revering yourself in a relationship.
Learn yourself: The value of self-reflection. Several of the women talked specifically about self-reflection as a necessary action to enhance personal well-being and improve relationship development. Through their experiences and observations, the need for understanding their own personal priorities as well as their relationship standards and expectations became apparent to them. They discussed the importance of engaging in self-reflection prior to beginning a romantic relationship with someone, but also after ending a relationship. To these women, self-reflection serves a tool to promote intentionality in relationship development which will lead to more positive outcomes in this sphere of their lives. Reflecting on your needs and desires in relationship places you in a better position to communicate what you want in a relationship to a potential or current partner. In addition, these women also acknowledged that thinking about the positive and negative aspects of a relationship is essential to avoiding negative outcomes in the future. Some of the women associated self-reflection with a period of being single wherein you are able to take time for yourself. For example, Jalia talked about her some of girlfriends’ failure to take time to reflect on their expectations after ending a relationship. She attributed desperation to be in a relationship to their unwillingness to engage in self-reflection. Jalia explained:

I think they’re just desperate to have someone so they just kind of, I guess maybe for lack of a better explanation don’t really care who it is. They just want to be in a relationship with someone. They’re dependent on having a boyfriend and that kills me. You don’t need to be like that. One friend, for example, she was married and had one kid. She moved to another guy that was the same kind of guy, had another kid. Now she’s in a relationship with this guy who has two kids. Calm down, take a little break. You don’t need to be in a relationship all the time. Think about yourself and now your children. Try to find yourself a decent dude, not just somebody to have around. If you’re just going for someone just to have around, it’s not going to work out just like in the past. I wish some of my friends would just slow down and take a deep breath and think about what they’re really looking for.
Jalia believed her friend continued experiencing the same negative results in a relationship because she never stopped to think about possible reasons causing the demise of her relationships with intimate partners. Jalia had learned the value of self-reflection through experiences in her own relationships. She realized that knowing her personal expectations and reflecting on her mistakes offered a positive foundation for subsequent relationships. Throughout the interviews, she pointed to moments of her own self-reflection which led to positive outcomes for her. Jalia paused to reflect and applied her past experiences to her future experiences in relationship development. She thought other Black women should also be instructed on the value of self-reflection. Jalia offered this advice for her peers:

Evaluate yourself before you make a commitment. Dating is one thing, but before you enter a more serious relationship definitely evaluate yourself and think about what it is you want and try to express that. Also try to get a feel for what the other person is looking for... Learn from your past…I think be aware of your wants and needs as much as you can.

Another participant, Shamika discussed a point in her life where she needed to figure out her direction in life. After ending a dating situation with a guy she learned was lying about his involvement with other women, she decided to take some time to herself and be alone for awhile so she could determine her priorities. She had been struggling with figuring out her professional path and she needed to be alone for a while to give her the mental space to think about what she really wanted for herself. Shamika explained her moment of pause to me:

Like at that point, after George, I was by myself because I was just like you know this is enough and I was like, I’m not about to go through all this in college and I was like I just need to be by myself. I started isolating myself from a lot of stuff and thought about things, about how my life was going...I just needed to know what I’m doing, I need to slow my roll and really think about what I need to do with the rest of my life…
Shamika told me taking time to reflect helped her to arrive at level of acceptance of where she was at that stage in her life. She felt strongly about women having self-awareness and self-confidence prior to developing a relationship. She felt the absence of self-awareness and self-confidence led to women lowering their standards in a relationship. Shamika articulated the importance of learning yourself in order to have a more positive sense of self and a better relationship:

I think that personally a woman has to be in tune with herself first. I think that she needs to have her mind set on things. She needs to be goal-oriented. She needs to be 100 with herself. You can’t have a half a person…Yeah, you really do need to be a whole person because that ‘One half and half make up a whole? No, no girl. Boo!’ Seriously. I feel like with me personally, the person that I am now, of course I’ve gotten better even in my relationship. I’ve become a better person. Still at the beginning I was a whole person…I feel like as far as being in tune with yourself, you need to have your own goals. You don’t need to do something because your guy’s doing it. What if it’s something that you don’t like? I also feel like women don’t need to lower their standards just because they want in a relationship. That’s like the biggest no-no ever. I feel like none of my standards have been lowered…I think we as Black women need to be in tune with ourselves, that’s the main thing, in order to have a successful relationship.

For Shamika, as well as Jalia, self-reflection should be a prerequisite for entering a relationship. Toya echoed a similar sentiment. She focused on living on your own first as opposed to living with a boyfriend or girlfriend as an avenue to learning yourself. She had a male cousin close to her that decided to begin living with his long-term girlfriend. She told me he had never really lived on his own, so to her it was too soon to move in with his girlfriend. As she thought about his decision, she felt it was valuable to live on your own first prior to living with an intimate partner because of the self-awareness that could be gained from the experience. Toya explained what an individual can learn from living on their own at some point before living with an intimate partner:
AS: What do you think is a value of being able to live on your own?
Toya: Knowing what you can and can’t handle, not just as far as financial stuff goes but knowing how you are by yourself not having parents around or having someone tell you, make sure you do this or make sure you do that but just knowing your own limits and boundaries before you discover someone else’s.

AS: So learning yourself first?
Toya: Yes, it’s something that you would need to do... If you don’t know what your weaknesses are when you’re by yourself, like if you’re a messy person or if you struggle with paying your own rent and everything, living with someone else is only going to make those problems worse. That’s why I assume and believe, you need to stable yourself before you move into a relationship or if you’re living with someone.

Toya believed personal challenges that are not addressed at the individual level prior to entering a relationship will only intensify within the couple unit. Having a “…full living on your own experience…” , as Toya put it, places a person in a better position to understand their flaws and deal with them before deciding sharing their life and their space with someone.

For these women, self-reflection provides a foundation for a positive well-being and positive relationships. One participant, Nichelle, advised other women “…to be selfish for a minute…” to give themselves time to think about where they want to be in life. As illustrated in the quotes presented, the women confirmed the value of self-awareness through their own experiences or from observing the decisions of significant people in their lives.

Speak your mind: The importance of communicating feelings and expectations. Through various relationship experiences, several participants said they learned the importance of speaking their minds. In the context of intimate relationships, speaking your mind refers to voicing your thoughts and opinions and communicating your expectations and standards all without fear or trepidation. Some of the women
experienced situations where they kept their feelings to themselves or did not express what they wanted in a relationship to their partners up front. Participants who held their feelings from their partners often experienced inner struggles and unsatisfying relationships. The women learned that communicating their feelings and expectations placed them in better position to make decisions, get along with their partners, and achieve the type of relationship they envision for themselves. Ella explained she avoided telling a former boyfriend she wanted to end the relationship because she did not want to hurt his feelings. Essentially she allowed the relationship to continue when she had become dissatisfied. She told me what she learned from this experience:

…I guess it taught me another thing, just better like communication skills. ‘Cause like I said the relationship was just kind of dragging on and like I said, he was really nice so I didn’t wanna’ be like, ‘hey I’m breaking up with you’. But looking back on it, that would have been the thing to do. So it taught me to just communicate better…I’ve learned to definitely just let things go when they’re not working out. I mean, just speak your mind, just speak up, you know, don’t let anything linger.

Declining to communicate your thoughts concerning a relationship, a partner’s behavior, or personal decisions placed some of the participants in situations longer than they desired. Ella acknowledged her delay in telling her former boyfriend she wanted to break up with him was immature on her part.

Another participant, Tayva, shared a similar situation with me. She avoided breaking up with her boyfriend for a while because, as she told me, “…I don’t like to hurt people’s feelings.” She said she ended up hurting his feelings anyway. Tayva dealt with a similar situation in her next relationship. At the time of the interviews, she was struggling with wanting to be with her boyfriend, TaShaun, but also knowing she was not going to get was she needed from him to be happy. Holding back caused Tayva to feel sadness
and confusion. When I asked Tayva how it made her feel to not be able to be honest, she said:

It hurts a little. It’s confusing and it makes me question well why can’t I just, you know, say what I wanna’ say ‘cause then, I mean, it’ll make me feel better and I think that’s kinda’ just that. But I mean with TaShaun, you know, when we first started dating it’s like I didn’t really wanna’ tell him things or like I was kinda’ afraid to tell him things. And he kinda’ helped me through, just, you know, it’s important to say stuff, you know, if it’s on your mind. And he kinda’ taught me to open up more and kinda’ not hold back so much. So that’s one thing I’ve learned.

Tayva realized she struggled with being honest in her current relationship as well as her previous long-term relationship. For her, she had a difficult time feeling comfortable about expressing her feelings to a partner:

AS: And when you say honesty, now do you mean being honest with your feelings?
Tayva: Everything. Feelings or thoughts or your actions, whatever.
AS: So tell me about times where this necessarily wasn’t present or when you figured out that this was something that was important?
Tayva: I think honesty, it’s a big thing in general. I think with me, it was both my past and current relationship, it’s just, I’m honest but it’s where I don’t express myself. So it’s kinda’ like I’m holding back and being dishonest a little ‘cause I’m not, you know, putting all my feelings out there. So I think that is something that fell on me is just saying more.

AS: What types of things do you feel like that you’re not totally honest about?
Tayva: Sometimes it is my feelings, a lot of it, you know, if someone asks me if I’m upset, I’ll be like, ‘No I’m fine’ but I’m not. And I think it’s more of I don’t really want people to know I’m upset, because that may lead to, ‘well why are you upset, you know, let’s talk about it’ and usually I’m not the kind of person that just wants to talk about it right then, it’s more of I have to get my thoughts together and talk about it. Or it’s just I’m not really comfortable talking about it.

Through her experiences, Tayva also learned it is better to be open with your partner about your feelings. Both Ella and Tayva struggled with voicing their feelings near the end of a relationship, but another participant, Jalia, learned it is important to also voice
your thoughts and feelings at the beginning of a relationship or dating situation. Jalia was in a relationship where she expressed difficulty in giving her boyfriend suggestions to improve his financial situation by seeking employment where he made more money for his time. She had certain expectations in a partner that she did not communicate to him when the relationship was initially developing. She wanted a partner with initiative and motivation to consistently move toward success. However, Jalia expressed that she did not know how to tell him her feelings. Additionally, there was always a sense of uneasiness between them because he did not have a lot of discretionary funds and she had a little extra money, so she would offer to pay for dates sometimes. Her benevolence made him uncomfortable. Eventually, she said he started using Jalia’s high educational attainment against her. The uneasiness took a toll on their relationship and after a while, they finally ended the relationship. Jalia said she learned being upfront about her feelings may have changed the outcome of their relationship:

…there were some things I wouldn't say to him because I didn't want to hurt his feelings, but I think if maybe I had been more open maybe things would have been a little bit different.

Jalia applied this lesson to her next relationship. She realized that speaking up about her feelings enhanced her relationship. She discussed the benefits of being open in her next relationship:

I was able to, when we first started dating I was able to tell him what I expected. I didn’t sit there and say that I want this, this and this, but kind of open with what my expectations were. I think that really changes the dynamic… I knew what I was going to put up with and what I wasn’t. I’m able to realize these things ahead of time and act on them right away if something does happen instead of just sitting on it for days and days and then getting angry. So I think that I’ve changed. I have more; I’m more open and more aware of the things that are going on...You know what you want or what the other person wants. There’s nothing wrong with going into something and not having it. There’s no reason it can’t work out. For me it’s better to know and have the other person know. That way
you know at the beginning if there’s something that’s glaring that you know it’s not going to work out. You can avoid that. As you go along in the relationship you know what they want, you know what you want. So it’s a smoother ride. If something happens down the line, you can say “Look, I told you about this in the beginning.” There’s no real bad surprises this way.

Jalia felt the openness alleviated surprises and contributed to positive problem-solving. Janae also talked about her inability to always express her voice in a relationship. This was a challenge for Janae since she was in high school. In her previous relationship, her boyfriend cheated on her and she never told him how she felt and wished she would have told him. She said, “…hindsight is always 20/20.”. The lesson she learned:

I guess to speak my mind more. I still don’t do that a lot but I’m trying to speak my mind more. To have an opinion and have a say in how these things will play out. If I’m upset or I’m bothered about something to actually say something about it.

In her current relationship, she said still experienced similar challenges of not always speaking up. Janae said her boyfriend encourages her to talk about her feelings and what she wants:

I guess sometimes I still have, I’m not as outspoken as I wish I was sometimes, and he knows that so like he’s trying to you know, work with me to get me to say what’s on my mind and stuff. He knows I’m thinking about something but not just telling him, so I guess working on being more, I guess confident and not saying that he’s going to judge me, which I know he won’t, and just saying what’s on my mind and not I guess holding back. Some of the time, I mean he already tells me what’s on his mind - I just need to do the same for him.

As her relationship further developed over time, she learned it is important to speak her mind and that speaking her mind is okay to do. Janae says her boyfriend provides her space to be open and honest, however, she admits she often holds in her thoughts and feelings:

I think I’ve learned that it’s okay to speak my mind, because I guess maybe I was, I never really said all that, I would just, you know, smile and be on my way about most of this stuff and you know, have a little conversation going on in my head.
And with being in a relationship you have speak your mind, still working on that but you have to speak your mind whether to let him know how I’m feeling and he’s there for me, so I know I can trust him and I’m able to speak my mind even though I don’t, but I’ve learned that it’s ok to tell him how you feel and he’s not going to get mad at you, or me.

Janae told me she has the ability to express and communicate what’s on her mind, but truthfully she said she does not always exercise this ability in her relationship. Through these descriptions, the participants clearly learned the value of speaking your mind. The inability or hesitance to let your voice be heard poses negative consequences for a relationships and personal well-being.

**Equally yoked: Reaching parity in mate selection.** The parents or primary caregivers of the nearly all of the participants communicated to their daughters to make certain their partners possess the potential for success. Most often this success was measured through educational attainment and motivation to achieve in life. All of the participants were in college on the path to successful careers or graduate education, so the parents desired their daughters to be with a partner who was going to be similarly successful, educated, and driven. One participant, Tayva, told me her mom felt strongly about her partner having motivation and goal orientation because she felt Tayva possessed those qualities and should be with someone who matched her in that respect.

Tayva explained this about her mom’s messages:

> I know, somewhat, the steps I’m gonna’ take to get it (success) and I guess she wants someone like that and not just someone who’s just like, oh well, I’ll get to it when I get to it and not really knowing what they want.

The idea of seeking a partner that is equally yoked was an important value parents worked to instill in their daughters. Some of the participants internalized these messages and adopted the same standards for themselves, while others used the information to form
their own personal standards in mate selection. Another participant, Shamika, told me while she was growing up that her dad always told her he wanted her to be with someone with a college education. She felt her current boyfriend, Jake, met her father’s standards.

When talking about her father’s messages about a future partner, Shamika said:

I mean as far as you know my dad saying you know, ‘I want you to meet somebody that’s equally yoked or compatible to you’ and he said that he wanted…me to meet my husband in college, and I think it was really rude that he said that, but I guess you know, he’s older and so much much wiser. That’s played a role clearly.

She told me she adopted her dad’s messages concerning mate selection. His messages influenced the standards she set for a partner. Shamika described Jake as very ambitious and said he is making strides in accomplishing his goals. She admired these qualities in him. When discussing the impact of her father’s messages, she said:

I just really set my standards high. I just went through a time when I was testing out and I’ve dated but I hadn’t had serious relationships because I don’t want somebody that’s out in the streets, I’m like ‘No’. I don’t want somebody who is like lazy and not intelligent or not in school, trying to do good for themselves so my dad always said I need someone who is equally yoked. So now I finally realize what that means...It means somebody that is on my level and doing the same thing that I’m doing, trying to go somewhere with their life, we’re kind of like on the same path. He loves Jake.

Another participant, Nichelle, also told me how her parent’s messages influenced her approach to mate selection. Nichelle said self-sufficiency was an important partner characteristic for her parents. She also said she evaluates the manner in which a man presents himself to her. As she grew older, her standards for a partner changed because she began using a different lens to appraise men because they could potentially become a husband and not just remain a boyfriend. She was actually using this new lens to appraise her current boyfriend who she had been dating since she was junior in high school. She described the characteristics her parent’s would like to see in a potential partner to me:
Someone who can take care of their self. It’s about taking care of me but if the person cannot take care of their self then they cannot take care of me. I feel like my parents want me to date someone who has the willpower to do so and wants to do that and has my best interest in mind.

Nichelle took these messages and applied them to her own mate selection standards. She said:

I am not judgmental but I am very, very picky. I always take both parent’s ideals into consideration. I always look at how a man is dressed. If he approaches me, I mean, if he has the audacity to approach me looking a mess it gives me a sense of who they are, maybe he is confident, or, at the same time, maybe he just doesn’t care. The way they talk when you start to ask questions because you don’t just date anybody…Being my age, and I am only twenty-one, but I look at how can this person benefit me, or how can I benefit them in the future. As opposed to being sixteen, at twenty-one it is different I’m looking for a lifetime partner. I am not looking for one now but I am just saying…

Another participant, Jalia, said her mom wanted her to be with a partner who was well educated and goal oriented. According to Jalia’s mother, a college education and a plan for the future lead to the ability to support a wife and family. Jalia said this about her mom’s guidance on mate selection:

…when she knew I was dating someone and when after a month or two and we were still together, then she would be like “Don't settle, make sure he has high ambitions and doesn't do drugs, you know, just a good genuine person.” And in college when I had a relationship that lasted for like four or five months again she's like ‘Don't settle, make sure they are going to finish college. Make sure they maybe want to get a Master’s degree or have a job plan or something like that so they can support a family and support you.’ And I'm like ‘Whoa, whoa lady! I'm not getting married to this person, calm down!’ like you know? But I mean it was just good motherly advice, I guess.

Jalia adopted some of her mother’s advice. She told me being with a quality individual was a given for her, but she felt differently about education as a necessity in a partner. Jalia is highly educated. She has two Master’s degrees and she is currently in a doctoral program, however, she favored motivation and drive over educational attainment. Jalia acknowledged it would be difficult for her to find a man she would be
attracted to, which are mainly Puerto Ricans, that has earned a doctoral degree. She believed success could be achieved without a college education. Jalia expressed that self-sufficiency, success, and motivation were still characteristics she valued in a partner, however, she believed a person can be accomplished without higher education. She did tell me a partner who exhibited laziness and lack of ambition would not work for her.

Jalia wanted a partner who was a hard worker. She used working hard as a garbage truck driver as an example for me, but quickly said “…not that I want somebody who drives a trash truck…”. When I asked Jalia how her mother’s messages influenced her, she said:

I don't think it really did. I mean I just tried to do my own thing. I wasn't going to settle, I'm just not at a point right now where I want to be married. You know, I just did my own thing and certainly I have learned from past relationships but don't settle… I mean that was just kind of the general thing, and you’re worthy, having somebody who is a high quality individual, and certainly that’s what I'm looking for, too... because I think education is not for everyone...just because you don't have a lot of school doesn't mean you're an idiot, it doesn't mean that you can't have a great job...school is for some people and apparently I like it - I don't know why but I keep coming back for more. But you really have to be passionate about what you do. Going to school doesn't have to be that, your passion.

Ella held a similar sentiment regarding her mother’s messages. Ella’s mother did not necessarily tell her to make certain her partner was well-educated and motivated, but to make certain her partner was not a ‘deadbeat.’ Ella recalled these messages as the only messages her mom would give to her concerning relationships and men. These moments were not planned, but came up when Ella and her mother were in certain situations where she was able to point out one of these ‘deadbeat’ guys. Ella’s mom used Ella’s father, who was an alcoholic and drug addict at one point as an example as well. When I asked Ella to tell what her mother would say to her about developing relationships, she said

…if there was like a situation where there was an example being presented, she would be like ‘don’t get a deadbeat guy like that’, you know, if they like do ridiculous things or you know… Someone that doesn’t take care of their kids,
someone that doesn’t have a job, just in general someone that doesn’t have very good character. And I guess she would refer to like my dad as like what you don’t want…I guess that would be it pretty much. Just not really anything like, most of them (the messages) were like what you don’t want to do as opposed to like what you, you know, like what would be like a healthy relationship or what you do want to do.

Ella said she was able to see the truth in her mom’s advice through observing the negative consequences of dating a man who is a deadbeat among women in her kin and peer networks. However, she believed her mother had minimal influence on her behavior. When I asked her about the impact her mom’s messages had on her, Ella said:

…not too much of an affect. Just because, I guess, I kind of made my own decisions about what I was looking for or what I like or dislike. But I guess her advice on things that you don’t want, since that’s pretty much all that she would mention, I found that to be true, like as I’ve gone, you know, through life I guess. Just some of the examples she would point out, I’ve seen how they kind of pan out with other people. Like my friends or relatives and if they particularly date someone that has those characteristics, I kind of see how it doesn’t play out well.

With this theme, the message from parents was clear: Find a partner with professional promise. Although daughters internalized this message in their own personal way, they all seemed to understand their parent’s desire for them to be with a partner who is equally yoked with respect to education, determination, and good character. Through their experiences, they also found value in being with a partner who has the potential for self-sufficiency and similar motivation to succeed in life

**Not right off the bat: Postponing sexual involvement.** All the women in the study were sexually active. Through their experiences, some of the women discussed learning valuable lessons about the role of sex in a relationship. Additionally, most of the parents advised their daughters to delay sexual involvement in order to avoid the possible consequences of sexual intercourse. Several participants recognized the benefits of postponing sexual involvement to develop a friendship with a potential partner. The
following subthemes highlight patterns I identified related to postponing sexual involvement in intimate relationships.

**Sex…if you have to do it, just be safe: Parents encouraging delayed sexual intercourse.** The messages parents communicated to their daughters concerning sex were most often short and simple. Some of the participants laughingly told me about parents instructing them to refrain from having sex until they were 30 or 40 years old. Many parents focused their messages related to sex on delaying sexual activity to a date far into the future. Marriage was often mentioned as the milestone where sexual intercourse would be acceptable to the parents. Other parents, who still championed delayed sexual intercourse, provided guidance and information on practicing safe sexual behavior as a precaution for daughters who may have decided to have sex before the parents may have deemed appropriate. The parents varied in how they communicated messages about sex, however, the message was generally consistent, which was to wait. To these parents, delaying sexual activity served as a defense to the possible consequences of sexual activity, such as unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. These consequences have the potential to pose challenges to the daughters’ academic achievement and career development. Parents focused mostly on these physical consequences of sexual intercourse and not necessarily the emotional consequences of sex. Ella’s mother gave her brief instruction on sexual intercourse:

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AS: What would she tell you about sex…
Ella: Don’t do that until you get married.
AS: That’s all she would say?
Ella: Yeah.
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When I asked Ella how this message impacted her sexual behavior, she simply said, “I heard her.” Another participant, Brittany, said her mother felt waiting for marriage to
have sex would be the best decision as well. However, her mother acknowledged this expectation may have been unrealistic given contemporary views on sex. She encouraged Brittany to engage in safe sex and to use contraception if she decided to have sex before marriage. Unlike the other parents, Brittany remembered her mother discussing the emotional ramifications of sex in terms of possible feelings of regret. Brittany said throughout the interviews she always felt she could talk with her mother about relationships and sex without being judged. Brittany did follow her mother’s advice to refrain from having sex in high school. Brittany told her mother when she first had sex, which was during college with her current boyfriend. She described her mother’s advice on sex when she was growing up and after she had informed her of her first time:

…we had talked about sex and there was the unspoken thing that I wouldn’t do it in high school but like I never got involved enough in a relationship to want to where the thought even run across my mind but it was kind of a thing that we had unspoken mutually agreed to and she’s like marriage is always the best bet but we’re in the 21st century. She was like I feel like you’ve waited this long, you can wait longer if you need to but I feel like you have done what I would have wanted you to do so be safe and use birth control but don’t feel like he’s the one because if you guys break up and you gave him your virginity don’t feel like ‘Oh God, I’m going to die because I’m not with the guy who took my virginity.’ She just wanted me to be prepared with the emotions that come with having sex.

Brittany’s father did not elaborate as much as her mother on having sex. In regard to messages about sex, Brittany only remembered her father instructing her to wait until marriage as well. However, she said he encouraged her feel free to talk to him about anything. Brittany briefly explained her dad’s messages:

AS: …So what else would he tell you about guys and developing relationships?
Brittany: The sex thing, no sex --
AS: Until when?
Brittany: Until marriage.
AS: Uh huh.
Brittany: And ‘til you’re 40, you know, that kinda’ thing.
I soon realized that parents’ telling their daughters to wait until they were older or married was a common piece of instruction participants remembered. Jalia’s mom also told her she should wait until she was 30. However, she added that Jalia should get to know someone prior to having sex with them and encouraged to take precautions, such as both her and her potential sex partner getting screened for sexually transmitted diseases. Her mother was the only parent who mentioned getting tested before having sex with someone.

…don't have sex right off the bat. Preferably don't have sex until you’re 30 I think it was...So she encouraged me to just wait until I knew. (That) I didn't know the person for just a week and we were having sex. ‘Wait till you get to know the person, make sure you take the proper steps for protecting yourself,’ so ‘If possible both get tested before,’ and all that jazz.

Jalia told me she later learned waiting to have sex with someone is a valuable endeavor. However, she learned this lesson through experiences where she said having sex too soon resulted in less than desirable consequences for her. Nichelle’s mother had also learned the consequences of having sex too young through experience. When talking to Nichelle and her sisters about sex, she used herself as an example because she became a teen mom at sixteen. Nichelle explained her mother never actually told her not to have sex, but using her experience as a teen mom struck a chord with Nichelle:

Nichelle: She never really said, ‘don’t do it’, but she always basically gave us consequences of sex. She talked about it, like what happens, what could happen, things that happen, but she never said don’t. She always used herself as an example and didn’t have to say any more.

AS: And it resonated with you?

Nichelle: Yes. She was open to talking about relationships so that if we did begin having sex we could talk to her and we could be taken care of.

AS: Taking care of, in terms of, medically?

Nichelle: Yes.
Nichelle said her mother was very open to talking with her daughters when it came to sex and relationships. This openness stood in contrast to Toya’s mom, who did not receive any messages from her mother. Toya lived with both her mom and grandmother while she was growing up, however, she viewed her grandmother as her primary caregiver. Her grandmother’s advice focused mainly on avoiding pregnancy. Toya’s parents divorced only months after Toya was born. In a similar fashion, Toya’s mom and her little brother’s father split up shortly after he was born. Toya explained:

I didn’t really get anything from my mom. I can’t think of relationship advice that my mom has ever told me, however my grandma has because I’m the only girl and all of my cousins are all boys, too and don’t get pregnant is the only thing and grandma always told me to find a Christian boy so I think that was her only two messages, find someone who loves Jesus and don’t get pregnant.

Toya told me that these messages did not actively influence her mate selection standards or her sexual involvement. She said she already desired a partner who was a Christian.

Despite these messages, all of the participants had been sexually active at some point. Some participants waited longer than others to have sex, however, all of them had been sexually involved. Most participants told me they first had sex with a serious dating partner or boyfriend. Some of the participants did wait for some period of time before deciding to have sex, while others followed their own agenda for their sexual involvement. Through future experiences, some of the participants understood the value of waiting to have sex with an intimate partner.

*Be friends first: Friendship as a foundation for intimate relationships.* A few of the women believed friendship should serve as a precursor to entering a serious relationship and becoming sexually involved with a partner. Through various experiences and advice, these women learned friendship is a necessary component in relationship
development. The women discussed the positive outcomes of establishing a friendship with a potential partner. Charlene emphasized the importance of being friends with a partner throughout her interviews. Charlene believed the absence of friendship in her relationship with Everett led to many of their issues as a couple. She felt it is important to get to know someone prior to entering a serious relationship with them. From her perspective, friendship contributes to developing respect for each other. She viewed respect as a buffer to potential negative situations that could occur in a relationship.

Charlene shared with me what she learned in her relationship with Everett:

So probably the most valuable thing that I’m saying is it’s important to be friends first... I definitely think that, with the Everett situation, even though we’re not the best of friends like we could be, the next relationship I have, if there is a next one, I would go into it with the mindset that I’m going to know you as much as I can...is there something I’m going to have to complain about because it’s getting on my nerves or is this you? Or do I like this about you? Do I not like this about you? Or try to understand why people are what they are and just have a genuine friendship first because I feel like if you have a genuine friendship, you have genuine respect. You’re not going to do certain things that you hear about girls and guys going through if they were friends because you’re not going to disrespect your friends like that. Um, I guess that’s the biggest lesson...

In Charlene’s previous relationship, she said problems were resolved with more ease because she and her former boyfriend were friends. In her relationship with Everett, she felt becoming sexually involved too quickly compromised establishing respect in their relationship. She reflected on what she would change if she had the opportunity to start the relationship over:

If I had it my way I think we would spend more time getting to know each other on a friendship level instead of coming into it thinking, like, oh, you are cute, you are nice, you are sexy, the whole moving onto that stage real quick. I think we should have spent more time doing activities...just time getting to know each other...conversation...So I think when you have a true friendship with someone you won’t disrespect them. And, then, if that does happen, you are going to feel bad for...you are not going to be okay with them being mad at you.
Charlene explained she wishes she would have waited to have sex with Everett. They had sex prior to becoming exclusive approximately two months after they began talking. However, after they became sexually involved, she said neither of them really considered ending the sexual component of their relationship:

...neither one of us were about to say, okay, maybe we shouldn’t have sex anymore. So I just think that if we would have waited longer, I know I would have personally felt more comfortable myself if I would have waited longer just to be, like, I don’t know. I waited long for the first one, so what made this one so special that I didn’t wait long at all?

Based on her experiences, Charlene said she would also tell other women to be friends first and postpone sexual involvement. She feels being involved with him sexually caused to stay in the relationship, when she felt she should end it. She also says getting to know someone allows you to determine your compatibility with that person and what behaviors or personality traits you will or will not tolerate. Charlene also suggested getting to know a partner’s family to gain insight on their emotional heritage. Charlene’s gave the following advice on developing a friendship with a potential mate:

Whether you’re sexually active, sexually frustrated, not sexually active, whatever it is, don’t let that be a temptation. If you can wait until you marry a person – wait – because it (sex) will only make things more difficult, and probably one of the reasons I’m staying with him is because that’s good…If you can avoid that as being one of the distracters, leave it out for as long as you can…And I bet if this whole time me and Everett didn’t do anything I would not be so slow to let him go. It would probably be a lot easier…because it’s just an the emotional tie to it. Meet the family, see where he comes from. Sometimes the reason I can understand why he does what he does or how he is, is because I can see his family acts that way.

Jalia also found value in postponing sexual involvement with a partner. She recalled several instances where she felt she had sex too soon. Over time, she realized her encounters were devoid of sentiment, so she decided she would wait to have sex with someone special to her:
Definitely that whole ‘don't have sex right off the bat’ - that was a mistake I made several times and I wish I hadn't done that...the first time I had sex it was with a guy I just met and it was just kinda like ‘Ah! I can't believe I just did that, my first time ever type of thing.’ It just seemed kind of like what a waste, like why am I doing this with someone I don't even know? I should have waited until somebody more special came along...’How do you get yourself caught up in this situation and doing these things?’ I think it probably happened twice after that. I think what happened was the first time it was the first time and it didn't really have any meaning to it, so immediately after that I was like ‘What the heck?’ And then I was like this is ridiculous, 'you can't be doing this, you’re putting yourself in a bad situation,’ and even though we were using protection and everything, it's unnecessary to get yourself into these bad situations where you don't know these people. So there was a long period there of celibacy, like a long period.

In her current relationship, Jalia said she waited a few months until she was comfortable with Jorge to have sex. She said he respected her feelings regarding waiting to have sex. She said it had been four years since she last had sexual intercourse, so she felt “…ready to get back into the game…” as she put it.

Shamika and her boyfriend also decided they would wait to have sex in order to provide space to establish a friendship. She believes people “…can't just hop into a relationship.” Shamika thinks people should get to know each other first. According to Shamika, waiting to have sex allows a couple to appraise the future of a relationship without being unduly influenced by the emotional or physical consequences of sex:

The first time, and like at first in our relationship, like we made sure our relationship was built on not sex and we like made sure everything, even though we were friends for so long, we just wanted to see how our relationship would go. It’s not like we just jumped into having sex. We just took it slow.

The notion of establishing a friendship and waiting to have sex appeared to be an important lesson for these women. Many parents encouraged their daughters to delay sexual involvement and this guidance was reified through the women’s relationship experiences.
Through thick and thin: The desire for commitment. Several of the women I interviewed discussed the desire for commitment in their relationships. From observing the relationships of primarily parents and grandparents, they were able to see how couples demonstrated commitment in a relationship. For the most part, the women discussed commitment as an enduring aspect of a relationship that continues on despite difficult moments between partners. The idea of sticking together through thick and thin embodied their constructions of commitment. Couples who showed support and dedication to their partners through illnesses, conflicts, separation, and time were couples who were committed in the eyes of these women. Even observing ‘nonmodels’ of commitment encouraged the women to value commitment and decide how they would preserve it in a relationship or marriage. Jalia described her parents staying together through thick and thin. She told me she would like to adopt this part of their relationship in her own relationship:

Well for them it seems like whatever – thick, thin - they always stick it out. They’re always here. I mean certainly there are bad times and there are good times but nobody’s ever walked away from it. And after 40 years, still having a strong relationship is amazing. I would hope for the same. The general quality of the relationship and the communication between the two of them is something that I really admire…their ability to stay strong during the hard times.

Jalia explained to me that her parents experienced a period of high conflict at one point in their marriage. To remedy their issues, they sought marriage counseling. Jalia said they were both dedicated to the counseling and making progress in the sessions. The notion of seeking counseling instead of giving up on their marriage was one the reasons she viewed her parent’s relationship as a representation of strong commitment.

Mashia’s view of commitment was also partially constructed through observing her parent’s marital interactions. She said she learned that conflict is inevitable in a
relationship but that conflict should not preclude a couple from making a relationship work. Mashia described this point of learning related to commitment:

I guess I learned that in relationships you all are going to have fights and everything but you all have to stick together, not just because you have kids but because you all really care about each other. And I think they really do care about each other. I meant they’ve been together so long and they don’t even know what life would be without you... Mom and Dad can talk to each other all the time and they can play around with each other, and they can tell each other the truth about each other and know that “I’m not going to cheat on you” and stuff like that. And I probably want my relationship to be so that we can be honest with each other and we can play around with each other but we still care for each other a lot.

Mashia associated commitment with a stability factor where you know that your partner will always be there offering their support as well as their fidelity. She desired this type of commitment for her own relationship.

Another participant, Tayva, discussed her grandparents as a model of this enduring commitment. She described her grandmother’s resolve to care for her ailing grandfather despite the stress that the situation caused her. From watching her grandmother, she also constructed a perception of commitment which is impermeable and unwavering. Tayva describes how her grandparent’s marriage influenced her perception of commitment:

Tayva: …one relationship, I mean to me was more of a supportive and committed, was my mom’s parents. And my grand-dad got, well her dad got Alzheimer’s, so I really can’t remember knowing him before he got it, so it was hard for me. But when I got older I could tell like when he got into the bad stages like you could tell my granny was stressed but at the same time, it’s like this is my husband, this is the man I love, so she was there, took care of him, just one of those things. It’s like she wanted to be the one to take care of him. I mean, with us, we supported her for doing that and like helped her out with that.

AS: Is that how you think it should be in a marriage?
Tayva: I think so. I think it should be you’re really supportive and you’re there no matter what. You just don’t give up easily no matter how hard it gets, and if it does get hard, you know, it’s like you – I
guess with me, like I have family, you know, to help me out. Or if you don’t you can seek help in other places, but you shouldn’t give up easily.

AS: Give up on the marriage easily?
Tayva: Yeah, I mean, a marriage is not easy, you have to work at things.

Tayva acknowledged to me that marriage is not an easy endeavor but involves hard work. Even when things become difficult to bear in a relationship, she feels leaving a relationship should not be a primary option.

In contrast to most of other participants, Nichelle’s parents did not provide this enduring model of a committed relationship. Nichelle shared that her parents cheated on each other throughout their marriage. She attributed their low level of commitment to their young age when they first formed their family. When reflecting on their marriage, Nichelle felt they were too young to develop an understanding of commitment in a relationship. She clarified:

My mom had her (Nichelle’s older sister) when she was 16 and they were friends and I think my mom and dad’s relationship was based on the fact they were young when they started dating and they were young when they got married. And they still had a lot of growing up to do and a lot of things they wanted to do...I don’t think they understood what commitment meant.

Because of all the hurt and pain she observed in her parent’s marriage that was caused by the infidelity, Nichelle decided that cheating was unacceptable in a relationship. She felt if a person wanted to be with someone else, they should simply put an end to their relationship. Nichelle felt some conflicts could be avoided by deciding to be with one person at a time:

I would love to avoid the infidelity. I feel like if you are going to be in a relationship it should be with one person and if you want to be with another person then you need to end it with the other person. There is no point in being with two people at one time. It just means you are unsatisfied and you should just look for something that is going to satisfy you. As far as arguments, arguing
comes with every relationship but some things can be avoided like infidelity. Half my parent’s arguments stemmed from that. That would be avoided.

Despite her parent’s low level of commitment to each other during their marriage mostly related to infidelity, her parents were able to provide her with an example that informed her perspective on commitment.

Nichelle also talked about her grandparent’s commitment to each other. Like Tayva, Nichelle admired her grandparent’s lifelong commitment to each other. However, she pointed out that this lifelong commitment could serve as both a blessing and a curse. It is blessing because they have this stability and dedication in their marriage. She described the positive aspect of their commitment:

They know they have each other, they know who they are married to. That is what I would love to take, what I would like to adopt, that they know they are married, they know they have this commitment but they are family-oriented. They both have that understanding, it’s not like one feels neglected. They have an understanding.

On the other hand, Nichelle explained that this lifelong commitment can be equated to commitment for commitment’s sake. In this sense, she associated their motive to stay together with legal directives related to marriage. She felt their marriage, although lasting, was somewhat devoid of communication and emotional closeness. Nichelle talked about the other side of her position:

As far as avoiding, I guess it is kind of a double standard, I also want to avoid that. The family-oriented thing is great but it’s also like they feel like marriage is a law-abiding thing like, we are married so we live together but we don’t have to talk. They talk but usually they are just bickering back and forth with each other.

Another participant, Ella, also felt her grandparents stayed in their marriage out of convenience and not necessarily because they were extremely happy with each other.

Nichelle desired both the lifelong commitment and the continuing emotional closeness in
relationship. For them, commitment is not only defined by the stability of a relationship, but also sustaining happiness and closeness over time.

**Coming to a solution: Working toward effective conflict resolution.** Most of the women in this study desired to keep the peace in their relationships and solve issues that arise. Participants discussed how they constructed their conflict resolutions styles through observations and relationship experiences. The women appraised examples from their surroundings to inform their own conflict resolution styles. Primary caregivers offered the primary models for learning conflict resolution. If the participants’ parents engaged in a conflict resolution style that produced positive outcomes, participants expressed adopting these strategies in their own relationship. Conversely, when participants observed ineffective conflict resolution in their environments, they used these observations to determine a more appropriate approach to solving problems.

Jalia reflected on her parent’s style of handling conflict in their marriage. She observed the absence of genuine consensus or progress when conflicts arose between them. Jalia believes couples should talk through issues in an effort to understand their partner’s perspective and possibly prevent similar conflicts in the future. Jalia did not characterize her parent’s marriage as highly conflictual, however, she did feel they could solve their conflicts more effectively by engaging in conversations about their thoughts and feelings. Jalia shared her thoughts on coming to a resolution:

…if you understand where the person came from so maybe you have a better understanding of them in general. And that's not to say my parents argue all the time but it would be nice that when they do have an argument they sat down and really talked out what precipitated that.

Jalia further elaborated on the value of talking through issues. She felt individuals miss out on getting to know their partner when they allow issues to fade away.
I think you miss the opportunity to further understand someone. I mean everybody's different so you don't know what upsets somebody, what hurts somebody's feelings. So me personally I wouldn't want to continue hurting someone's feelings if I could avoid it, or maybe there's something that I could just simply change that would prevent this from happening in the future. It is good at times to be able to just let things go but sometimes you need to be able to just sit down and discuss it, and if I can prevent something then, a negative thing, then I would want to do that because I do not like conflict.

In Jalia’s current relationship, she said she tries to discuss issues as soon as they arise, so she and her boyfriend, Jorge, are able to maintain peace between them. Another participant, Shamika, also used her parent’s marriage to inform her approach to solving conflicts. Before divorcing, Shamika shared that her parents argued frequently, so much that Shamika felt a sense of relief after the divorce. She reflected on the marriage and told me she would like to avoid the yelling and lack of affection between her mother and father. She said that she still yells sometimes when she is arguing with Jake, but they actively engage in strategies to control their emotions. When I asked Shamika what aspects of her parent’s relationship she would like to avoid, she responded:

Just the yelling and the affection. I would take the yelling out even though I haven’t. I think for the most part in my relationship is a lot better than theirs, I think. The affection is there. Just you know considering how Jake feels about certain situations, like if he tells me something he doesn’t like then I’ll take it into consideration and try to put myself in that position and try to understand. So I try to be more understanding. I realize there is a lot of stuff that you don’t have to argue about. If he feels a certain way about something and I don’t understand it, I can still respect it. Kind of like how my dad didn’t want my mom to go every Saturday with my grandmom, she kind of just ignored it so I wouldn’t want something like that because I can balance stuff out and try to be understanding and communicate a lot more. Like we kind of have a rule where we don’t yell or cuss at each other. Sometimes if we like yell and raise our voice, we’re like wait a minute don’t start yelling, so yeah, we kind of like try to keep it cool.

Like Jalia, Shamika also felt talking through issues is valuable to a couple. She added that is important to let issues go once they have been adequately addressed. She told me she followed a “…life is too short…” philosophy, so she thought it is best to discuss issues,
solve them, and move on. Her perspective on letting go of issues was partially influenced by Jake being in a car accident. This accident served as a reminder to Shamika and Jake that life is unpredictable and should not be spent arguing with someone you love.

Shamika described how she and Jake view coming to a solution:

I think that over time we have grown into being like ‘Life is too short.’ He did have a really bad wreck and I think that made us both realize that you never know what’s going to happen – ever. Ever since then our arguments do not last, at all. We address it and keep it moving. If there’s something that needs to be changed we’ll say that. If not then we’ll address how we feel and okay, next topic. I feel like with that car accident that he had, I think that helped us, even though we’re young. We still don’t know what’s going to happen ever. I think that we appreciate each other more, even though he’s pissy right now, it’ll be over in a few hours.

Shamika believed holding grudges toward a partner adversely influences a relationship. She felt there is always a solution to most conflicts and she is willing to correct her mistakes in order to move on from the conflict. Shamika offered her thoughts on holding onto issues in a relationship:

I think that changes your relationship if you keep holding onto something. Everybody’s not perfect and you learn from your mistakes and you don’t keep – of course if it’s cheating that’s different. But a stupid argument like if I said something to him that hurt his feelings, I feel like he shouldn’t just keep griping on it. Tell me what I did to hurt your feelings and I’ll fix it. We’ll keep it moving. Yeah, I think it’s bad to keep holding onto stuff personally. I think that you should just let stuff go.

Janae also thought couples should not hold grudges. Even though Janae and her boyfriend had not a serious argument yet, she knew she wanted to discuss the issue and resolve it immediately. She admired the manner in which one of her girlfriends handled conflict in her relationship. Janae recognized their relationship was not perfect, but she appreciated the way they addressed problems promptly to avoid staying mad at each other.

…one of my friends, she’s, I mean she has arguments here and there but she seems legitimately happy with her relationship and I like how they, I guess,
handle their arguments, in a way like then we last, me and Billy, we had a major argument, I’d like to handle it like them. They are able to talk it out and work things out at that moment so they you know, don’t go to sleep mad at each other and they don’t hold grudges for like over a day or anything like that. So I would want our relationship to be like that too, when we do have a huge argument I guess.

Janae’s friend’s conflict management style served as a model for effective conflict resolution she would adopt in the future. Brittany used her mother and stepfather as a model of effective conflict resolution. She respected their readiness to talk through issues and determine a solution. She said she learned to approach conflict through observing their interactions and listening to her friend talk about their relationship:

... I feel like I learned how to like work out problems because of them. To watch and see them talk it out and come to some kind of solution and, I don’t know, I feel like I learned from that, how to be not so hasty in making decisions and, you know, to compromise...They talk things out. They don’t really like yell or anything like that…they bicker sometimes, but what relationship doesn’t? I feel like they’re always willing, because they’re committed to each other they’re willing to work out problems, they’re willing to talk things out to try to come up with the best solution.

Brittany discussed her application of their conflict resolution to her own relationship. She admits the style is not always successful, but they still try to talk through issues and respect each other’s opinions:

In the last interview I was talking about how my mom and my step-dad do that and that’s one thing I try to…I try to listen to what you say and know where he’s coming from before I interject and say what I have to say and think that what I have to say is right and I try to understand. It doesn’t always work but I try and I think he does, too.

In contrast to Brittany, Nichelle learned to approach conflict in a more constructive manner compared to the ineffective approach often exhibited between her parents. Nichelle shared that she heard her parents yell at each other frequently and occasionally
observed them engaged in aggressive episodes with each other. She found their approach to be flawed and said she naturally adopted a positive demeanor when handling conflict.

At an early age, I learned the difference between right and wrong. I feel like I developed a lot of responsibility from watching them act a fool. Watching them argue, I am more calm. I kind of approach things differently than my parents did with any conflict. My mom is aggressive and my dad is passive and I am assertive. I think that with those two, I just became assertive. That’s a really good question. All, I can say is that I have learned, I know I have learned a lot.

Most of the women strived for harmony in their relationships. Through observing the interactions in significant relationships in their environments, which were most often their primary caregivers, they were able to formulate an approach to conflict intended to effectively address issues. As echoed in the quotes, most participants agreed that communication or talking through issues was the best way to solve problems and perhaps prevent them from surfacing in the future.

**No wool over my eyes: Guarding trust and hope.** Several women discussed withholding trust in their relationships. Some of the women had received negative messages about men from significant people in their lives, which caused them to guard their trust with intimate partners. Other women decided to guard their trust in a relationship because they had experienced deception and dishonesty in previous relationships. These hurtful situations prompted the women to be vigilant of the trust they extend to partner in an effort to lessen their vulnerability to pain. Not only did some of the participants express distrust for men, but they also expressed distrust for other Black women. For these women, guarding their trust provided the women with a sense of control over their hearts and their feelings.

For some of the participants, the foundation for guarding their trust in a relationship was formed by messages from their parents. Mashia’s mother warned her
men were sneaky and that she would find out for herself. Mashia confirmed to me she felt
the same way as her mother. She relayed her mom’s messages concerning men:

AS: What else does she say that sticks out to you?
Mashia: She says that all guys are sneaky and just listen to what they say, you’ll have to find out for yourself.
AS: When she would say to you that all guys are sneaky, what thoughts come into your mind?
Mashia: I know they are and they don’t have to be sneaky, like sexually sneaky, but I just know that they are.
AS: Is it a fair statement to say that you feel like guys are sneaky even now?
Mashia: Uh-huh.

Her feelings were reinforced by observing guys frequently attempting to talk to her or her
girlfriends even though they may have already been involved with someone. She explained:

AS: So what happened either with past experiences, or with your girlfriends or whatever that makes you feel like that?
Mashia: Just guys trying to talk to you knowing that you have a boyfriend or something, or he has a girlfriend and still tries to talk to your friend and just stuff like that.
AS: So you’ve seen a lot of that?
Mashia: Yeah.

In Mashia’s current relationship, she said she sometimes engaged in behaviors that
demonstrated distrust of her boyfriend. She said she trusted her boyfriend, however, she occasionally went through his phone just to check on things. Mashia told me she and her boyfriend have had disagreements about her going through his phone, so I asked her tell me more about her position on the issue:

AS: You said he has an issue with you going through his phone?
Mashia: He acts like he does but I told him I do it every once in a while. He said why and I said I just want to sometimes. He acts like he does.
AS: What does that mean for you?
Mashia: I shouldn’t go through his phone but I trust him. I just like to check up every now and then.
AS: To check up every now and then to see what?
Mashia: Who he is talking to. That’s it.
AS: To make sure nothing is going on?
Mashia: Yes. Just to make sure.

Her boyfriend had abruptly informed her he wanted a break to have time for himself at one point, which caused Mashia to develop a degree of uncertainty about the relationship despite them restoring the relationship soon after the break. Discussing this break made Mashia visibly upset. She acknowledged her becoming emotional in our interview made her aware that she was still scared, but she said she was trying to work on it. She said his assurances that it would not happen again make her feel better, however, she said, “…you may say it now but tomorrow it will be a different story.” She confirmed that his “…out of the blue…” action affected how she perceives his level of commitment to their relationship. Mashia told me later that she has learned to trust more. Another participant, Toya, who dated a guy prior to coming to college who dated many other women concurrently, also said she learned, “…probably not to be so trusting.” However, in her current relationship, she also said she needed to be more trusting since she was in a different situation. Toya wanted to stray away from the distrust developed in her previous dating relationship. She said she was mindful of “…making sure that I’m a more of a trusting person and that making sure that I am not putting my guard up too much, because of stuff that I dealt with him and everything else.” Similar to Mashia, she was also learning to ease up on checking the boyfriend’s cell phone and she said she needed to “…stay out of his business…” because he has not given her any reason to not trust him.

Painful experiences resembling to Mashia’s situation, often cause the women to reevaluate how much trust they extend to a partner. Brittany decided to be more vigilant of a partner’s behavior after being cheated on by a previous boyfriend. She actually
caught her former boyfriend with another female by accident one day while she was visiting a friend. She said she did not want to take this incident and associate deception with all guys just because of one guy, but nevertheless this incident did alter her view on trust somewhat. Brittany recounted her feelings:

It just kinda’ made me like wanna’ be aware of…what’s really going on…I don’t think I was like…thought all guys were dogs after that because, you know, you can’t judge every guy just based on what one guy does. But I think I took that away from that and learned, you know, to be a little bit more observant…make sure you really know what’s going on. I don’t wanna’ say not so trusting, but I guess that’s what it is.

With Brittany’s current boyfriend, she says she tries not to plan too far into the future for fear of being disappointed. She has often observed her girlfriends placing a great deal of hope into their relationship only to have the relationship end. When I asked her if she could see her current boyfriend potentially being her husband, she told me:

I say I do, but I just really try not to like go there. ‘Cause I just feel like, you know, just like looking at my friends and how they, oh he’s the one and duh, duh, duh and then he like cheats on her or something like. I just try not to, I try to prevent myself from getting hurt I guess, like a safeguard, try not to look at things too far into the future.

Shamika also experienced infidelity in her previous relationship. She said this relationship caused her to adopt a tougher demeanor, wherein her tolerance level is low. Through that experience, Shamika’s self-worth was strengthened, which caused her tolerance level in a relationship low for negative behaviors. She explained:

Of course I was so blinded by love. Yeah, I learned a lot from that relationship that’s why I’m so mean right now. Well, I’m not really mean but I don’t take any crap…From that relationship I learned that I really am a great person and I can be a great girlfriend. I feel like when I am in a relationship I put my all into it. There’s no 80%, 70%.

Shamika’s mother warned her to monitor the kindness she extends to men because they will perceive the kindness for weakness. For Shamika’s mother, men should not be
trusted to value a woman’s time or kindness because they will most likely take advantage of it. She recalled her mother’s message:

She would just always say don’t be too nice to guys because they will take advantage of you and don’t like guys take advantage of you and don’t be so available, that was like her main thing, don’t make yourself too available to a guy because they will just take that for a weakness.

Shamika’s father communicated a similar message about trusting people, which Shamika seemed to adopt for herself. She remembered his advice, “…you can’t really trust everybody. I know he’s taught me you can’t trust anybody.”

**One eye open: Distrust for females.** Some of the participants also expressed distrust for other females, particularly Black females on campus. They sensed other females exhibited a blatant disrespect for their relationships by deliberately approaching their men despite the other females knowing the guys are in a relationship. When Ella discussed her boyfriend Gary’s interactions with his female friends and his naivety toward their intentions with him, she said to me, “…you know how girls can be.” When I asked her what she meant, she clarified her feelings for me:

AS: ...let’s see here, there is one thing that I wanted to go back to. So you made the statement, ‘you know how girls can be.’
Ella: Mmm Hmmm.
AS: --what exactly did you mean by that?
Ella: I don’t know, I’m trying to like think of it in like the proper terms.
AS: No, just say whatever comes to mind.
Ella: …they can just be trifling, like you know, in my opinion, if like I know that like a guy is dating another girl, you know, I don’t really try to come in between that. And some people, they will on purpose, just so they can be that way.
AS: Uh huh.
Ella: Also, girls like they have little sneaky things that they do, you know, I guess along the same lines and I think when they know that you have a girlfriend, that’s when they want to do it even more. Like, you know, I don’t know, I guess they find some sort of satisfaction that, you know, this guy has a girlfriend but I can still talk to him and, you know, get close to him or whatever.
AS: Right. So does that make you leery of girls who kind of hang around Gary or?
Ella: Yeah, uh huh.
AS: Yeah. So it can never really be anything that’s like legitimate, that you’re always kind of maybe looking at other females like with one eye open?
Ella: Yes.

Ella’s distrust was not necessarily directed toward her boyfriend, but toward his female friends. Over time, she said observed the devious ways of females attempting to become more than plutonic friends with her boyfriend. Nichelle also discussed the prevalence of women on campus disrespecting relationships. She specifically highlighted this issue as unique to the Black campus community:

AS: Do you feel like there’s anything unique about being an African American in college while in a relationship and are there issues that are unique to that group of people?
Nichelle: I think it’s unique because and I can only speak from experience as far as here. A lot girls come off desperate. Like there have been a lot of girls that have approached Tim and have tried to talk to Tim and have been persistent, like they really just don’t value the next person. I think that being an African American woman in a relationship you can kind of see another person’s point of view like you do hear about somebody cheating on his girlfriend you know how to be empathetic for the girlfriend; or you know to be empathetic for the boyfriend and it makes you appreciate the things you have and the relationships you have not just with your significant other cause you kind of know how to put the shoe on the other foot.

AS: So you think a lot of black women on campus don’t do that?
Nichelle: Yeah, well when I first came to the University of Kentucky I was told to be careful because you don’t know what goes on, on South campus if you’re on North campus and vice versa. I guess there was a lot of problems with the girls, I don’t know and the ones that I have come in contact with are just awkward, not awkward but more or less like I wouldn’t dare trust her with my boyfriend, stuff like that.

Shamika shared Nichelle’s feelings. She also emphasized the devaluation of Black couple relationships on campus by other Black peers:
AS: From your view what is different or challenging about being in a relationship in general? I guess in a setting like this and being an African American female?

Shamika: For being African American, some people can be crude and try to tear your relationship apart. I’ve experienced that in the beginning of our relationship.

The role of trust in intimate relationships was a relevant issue for the women in this study. Women described monitoring and controlling their trust in a relationship in order to avoid vulnerability to hurt or to establish a positive atmosphere for their relationships. Through various experiences, the women decided to reevaluate the manner in which they extend their trust to partners. Additionally, some of the women withheld trust for individuals outside their relationship, namely other women. Some women chose to be more vigilant of the actions of their partners as well as others in their environment. This vigilance provided a sense of control or foresight in their relationships.
Chapter Five: Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to discover the experiences through which Black collegiate women construct their understanding of knowing and being in intimate relationships. In the following discussion, I will integrate findings with existing research, highlight contributions of my research, and present implications for practice and directions for future research. The findings from this study can support future and existing research with similar to findings, however, they should not be overstated. On a programmatic level, the findings from this study and the recommendations presented below should be interpreted and applied cautiously due to the small number of participants included in the sample.

By utilizing principles of symbolic interaction to guide this study, I was able to increase our knowledge of the forces influencing self-definition, self-identity, and decision-making processes among a sample of Black collegiate women in the context of intimate relationships. The narratives shared by the women in this study revealed a number of experiences which prompted them to engage in self-reflection, critique, and learning. These moments of introspection moved them closer to their conceptions of optimal personal well-being and intimate relationship well-being. On a personal level, hearing messages, observing others, and experiencing relationships for themselves provided these women with a foundation for knowing the importance of preserving self-worth and self-identity, establishing expectations, and communicating thoughts and feelings. Additionally, the women were also able to identify the necessary elements for their ideal intimate relationship. For these women, being introspective is a worthwhile endeavor to define and refine their personal standpoint and their interactional approach.
with respect to intimate relationship development. Due to their experiences, the women were also able to articulate relationship wisdom they would share with other females like themselves to potentially avoid similar challenges and enjoy similar successes. I will discuss major findings emphasized by the participants in the areas of relationship communication, mate selection, and defining core components of healthy relationships. These findings are important for academic and applied work and are particularly relevant given the significant impact that family of origin, intimate relationship experiences, and current mate selection conditions have on the construction of personal attitudes and behaviors related to intimate relationships.

**Relationship Communication**

Direct verbal communication was one of the major pathways influencing the participants’ constructions of their personal attitudes and behaviors related to intimate relationships. Direct communication included advice, suggestions, and other instances where direct messages were given from a particular source. Relationship communication provided women with a framework for judging relationships and tools to appraise the quality of their relationships.

**The role of primary female caregivers.** The women indicated most of the relationship guidance they received was given to them by their mothers or primary female caregivers. According to research and scholarly work on socialization, females are often taught to do relationship work, so it is not surprising mothers would be the main parental figure imparting relationship advice to their daughters (Gilligan, 1982). Previous research has demonstrated mothers are the primary sexual socialization agents when considering both parents (Averett, 2004; Dilorio, Kelley, & Hockenberry-Eaton, 1999). Although mothers gave the most advice, there were some daughters in the study that
could not recall receiving any advice from their mothers and others who chose not to talk to their mothers about relationships. Some participants who grew up without a consistent father figure in their life were among those who generally avoided soliciting advice from their mothers. These daughters may have been unable to observe their mothers in consistent, healthy relationships with their fathers or other male figures and may have, therefore, led them to believe their mothers lacked sufficient experience to give advice on healthy relationships. In sum, daughters described either open, consistent communication with their mothers or limited, sometimes nonexistent communication with mothers regarding men and dating. In either case, mother-daughter communication regarding intimate relationships and sexual behavior has strong implications for female children’s future standpoint and behavior.

The participants who felt comfortable talking with their mothers about relationships expressed feeling fortunate to have this open line of communication with their mothers. Participants that engaged in open communication with their mother or mother figure were more likely to feel at ease discussing their sexual experiences with them as well. Studies show that in Black families, the mother-daughter relationship and their communication is highly important when evaluating outcomes related to intimate relationships, particularly related to sex (Hutchinson, et al., 2003; Hutchinson & Montgomery, 2007; Usher-Seriki, Bynum, & Callands, 2008). Therefore, this open communication between mother and daughter facilitates the exchange of life experiences, the search for guidance, and the opportunity to share wisdom and insight. Subsequently, daughters who feel comfortable talking to their mothers have the opportunity to receive
guidance from an older, wiser, mature figure, provided their mothers possess these qualities.

**The role of primary male caregivers.** In contrast to mothers, the participants often mentioned their fathers’ minimal or limited advice concerning men or relationships. In general, this lack of communication was acceptable, and in some cases preferred, due to the participants’ lack of comfort in discussing sexual or relationship matters with their father or father figure. Fathers were described as unreasonable and ultra-protective when it came to their daughters and their dating relationships. For example, Jalia reported that her father’s high standards caused her to be extremely reluctant to bring male suitors around her father, so much so that she said she would only introduce a boyfriend to her father shortly before getting married. Our conversation illustrates Jalia’s perspective on communicating with her father about intimate relationships:

**AS:** Now what messages did your father give you about developing relationships?

**Jalia:** None.

**AS:** None at all?

**Jalia:** I mean my dad and I never really talked at all about relationships. I’ve always kinda been nervous about that. I think I brought this guy home to my house when I was 15 and my mom and I planned it so my dad would be at a baseball game, and something happened and it rained and so he came home early. And I felt so bad for the boy - I mean my dad just had question after question after question. And I know he just wants to protect me and to make sure the boys’ not trying to do anything crazy and but I was like never again, I'm just going to tell my dad, I'm going to call him and say ‘Get your tuxedo and just meet me at the church.’ And he wants me, I mean he's always said I could tell him anything but I can't. So you know he says, ‘I trust that you will come to me if you have a question or if you want to talk to me about a relationship, but I'm not going to just offer my advice to you.’ So yeah, I can just trust my mom.
Such exchanges illustrate the level of depth involved in this father’s dialogue concerning relationships and men. Many of the daughters acknowledged deferring their relationship concerns to their mothers, which is consistent with previous research on parent-child communication related to this topic. Interestingly, a few participants shared their fathers encouraged their daughters to openly discuss these matters, however, the majority of participants seem to believe their mothers were better able to handle discussing these issues. Much of the limited advice given to daughters about relationships was philosophical in nature. Participants were encouraged by their fathers to select a quality mate, adhere to high relationship standards, and value their chastity by preserving it as long as possible. These messages influenced the women’s sense of self and their expectations for a mate and relationship. None of the women recalled their fathers providing pragmatic guidance or support related to sex, contraception, or sexually transmitted infections, other than recommending sexual abstinence until marriage. Although well-meaning, this study showed that overprotective fathers with exceedingly high standards can inadvertently prevent their daughters from discussing these issues with them. For that reason, father-daughter communication may be compromised if either party feels uncomfortable speaking about the subject matter.

Despite their residential status, fathers are in an ideal position to offer relationship insight to their daughters from a male perspective. In an exploratory qualitative study on the retrospective reports of sexual communication and support from fathers, Hutchinson and Cederbaum (2010) discovered college women believed fathers could have better facilitated their understanding of men by providing them an insider view. Discussions with daughters about relationships, men, and sex do not have rest solely on mother or
female caregivers. However, participants, such as Jalia, were content with solely going to their mothers about relationship issues. As previous research has demonstrated, both parents must take an active role in fostering parent-child relationships and cultivate open lines of communication because daughters can benefit from guidance coming from both parents. Mothers and fathers should be encouraged to share in the responsibility of both relationship and sexual socialization.

**Mate Selection**

Women in the study recalled strong messages from their parents concerning mate selection. The parents expressed a desire for their daughters to be with someone who was equally yoked, or someone who possesses similar potential for success. The parents tended to attribute this potential for success with educational attainment and professional promise. Some of the parents associated educational attainment with the ability to be self-sufficient and to adopt the role of provider in the household. hooks (2001) agreed that many Black women desire to have a husband who can provide for a household. She recalled, “Every black woman I knew growing up dreamed of having a Black male partner who could give her financial support and allow her to be a housewife. Of course the reality of class and race politics made it all but impossible for these fantasies to be fulfilled (hooks, 2001, p. 158). Although none of the women in this study desired to become homemakers, they did express the desire for potential marital partners to be able to share at least equally in providing for a household through educational attainment and/or career development. Several of the participants also embraced the notion of being in a relationship with a partner who is determined, educated, and self-sufficient. The messages the parents offered concerning mate selection provided the women with a foundation to develop their standards in a partner. Nevertheless, the mate selection
expectations of both parents and daughters may be compromised by current conditions related to cultural standards, imbalanced sex ratios, and mating pool quality.

According to the traditional rules of marriage, women generally follow or desire to follow hypergamy, which is the tendency to marry up. Women will attempt to develop connections with men who are somewhat older, more educated, and of equal or higher social status (Ingoldsby, 2003). Conversely, men tend to follow hypogamy, wherein they prefer women who may be shorter, younger, and of equal or lower status. Ingoldsby (2003) refers to these traditional practices as the marriage gradient. However, the marriage gradient is complicated by the imbalanced sex ratios because females almost always outnumber males beginning in the adult years. These complications in mate selection are pronounced for Black women. Hill (2005) asserts, “The traditional norm of women ‘marrying up’—or marrying men who have more status, education, and income than they do—is complicated among (B)lacks and increases the fragility of their relationships” (p. 102). The economic realities of many Black people coupled with an imbalanced dating and marriage pool make adhering to traditional rules of marriage selection an arduous task for Black women. The imbalanced gender ratio makes it difficult for a substantial number of Black women to marry at all, much less to marry up with a mate who has equal or better education, employment, and social standing. All of the women were in relationships during the interviews, so challenges in meeting a mate with similar education and potential for success were rarely discussed during the interviews. However, Jalia, a doctoral student, mentioned her perceived difficulty in meeting a male partner with a doctoral degree as well, although her parents strongly encouraged her to date someone with similar education. She said:
It always comes down to this education piece, and my thing is like you don't have to have the same education that I do - probably that's going to be hard to find, not to toot my horn. But I just want somebody who works hard, you know...because I am mostly attracted to Puerto Ricans, and I don't want to say it but I haven’t seen that many Puerto Ricans in PhD programs. And so I never really thought “Oh yeah, you gotta get a PhD.” I never thought I would, so why would I hold somebody to my standards? I just want somebody who works hard.

Jalia’s willingness to date someone with lower educational attainment could be linked to her acceptance of the decreased likelihood she would date a man of color with advanced graduate education. Furstenberg (2001) contends that as Black females climb the educational ladder and enter into highly paid careers, the likelihood of finding a Black male partner who is equally yoked decreases. Interestingly, parents encouraged their daughters to only form connections with partners who are college educated and demonstrate the potential for successful careers. This advice is given in a context where the more education Black women attain, the less partners are available to them who are similarly educated. Following this guidance may pose challenges for the participants and other Black women who find themselves in the mate selection process.

Millennial collegiate Black women are faced with an unbalanced campus dating scene. In the United States, Black females comprise 65 percent of the Black population across colleges and universities. Not only is enrollment unbalanced, Black females are also outpacing Black male in graduation rates (JBHE, 2006). Because of these conditions, many educated Black women will face navigating through a dating scene with discouraging odds. Successful, educated Black men are in a better bargaining position in mate selection than similarly situated Black women. As a result, Black women may have to consider readjusting their desired qualities in a mate with respect to age, race, educational attainment, and financial success if they desire marriage in their future.
An important factor in mate selection relevant to this population is endogamy or the social pressure to marry someone within one’s own group. Generally, people in the United States either feel compelled to or desire to marry someone with similar characteristics, such as religion, race, ethnicity, and social background (Ingoldsby, 2003). In regard to interracial dating, many Black women have reported some reluctance to date men who are not Black (Cuyjet, 2006; Kitwana, 2002). In contrast, Black men are more likely to date outside of their race than Black women. Crowder and Tolnay (2000) highlight the rate of interracial unions for Black males and non-Black females surpasses the rate of Black females and non-Black males. Black men who date non-Black females tend to have high educational attainment and successful careers (Qian, 1997). These figures lessen the quality of the mating pool by disproportionately removing the most attractive, higher status Black men from the marriage market (Crowder & Tolnay, 2000). In this study, most of the women were in relationships with Black men, with the exception of Jalia, whose boyfriend was Latino. Additionally, all of the participants’ boyfriends were either enrolled in college or previously graduated from college. However, for the Black collegiate female population in general, being encouraged to date inside their race and at their educational level may be met with some difficulty. Conversely, Black college women who are considering expanding their desired qualities in a mate, with respect to race and educational attainment, may also face social and cultural pressures and stigma (Folan, 2010).

**Defining Core Components of Healthy Relationships**

Existing literature on relationship quality and stability provides us with a wealth of evidence pointing to the necessary elements that lead to healthy, satisfying couple relationships. The body of empirical work from which most of our knowledge about
relationship quality and relationship stability is derived has been drawn largely from homogenous samples of White, middle-class couples (Alder-Baeder, Higginbotham, & Lamke, 2004). This does not negate the utility of this knowledge, however, the nuances and unique characteristics of diverse populations must be considered in the development of research-based programming. In the narratives of the women in the study, I was able to draw parallels in their learning experiences with empirical evidence regarding what is needed to develop healthy, satisfying relationships. These findings can contribute to existing conceptual frameworks of healthy, couple relationships. In the analysis of the present study, several of the women’s learning experiences or points of introspection aligned with documented core components of healthy relationships. Through various points of learning in their experiences, the women discovered or confirmed the value of commitment, trust, communication, conflict management, and self-care, which are identified in the literature as core components of healthy relationships (Adler-Baeder, Higginbotham, & Lamke, 2004). Understanding their personal standpoints on carrying out these core components of healthy relationships can inform research and practice.

**Commitment.** One of the objectives of this dissertation was to understand how Black female college students define healthy couple relationships. One of the aspects found to form Black collegiate women’s definition of a healthy relationship was commitment. Dimensions of commitment are important to consider because commitment is a persistent predictor of relationship quality and stability (Goddard, 2007). There have been few studies that have highlighted personal definitions of commitment, especially in the Black community (Chaney, 2006). In the present study, the women frequently associated longevity, ‘stick-to-itiveness’, support, and fidelity with their conceptions of
commitment, which were attributes portrayed in significant relationships they observed over time. Several of the women admired the willingness of partners in these relationships to make their relationships work despite hardships and obstacles. Their ideas mirrored the thoughts on commitment among another sample of college students, who also felt commitment required enduring dedication and hard work (Weigel et al., 2003).

In the National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Network’s conceptual model of healthy relationship development, the participants’ ideas concerning commitment are closely related to several of behaviors in the core component, Choose. Within this component, the women made reference to several of the behaviors that enhance commitment such as deciding to make their relationship a priority, making a sustained commitment to effort in their relationship, and setting limits on thoughts and behaviors that would harm one’s self, their partner, and the relationship (NERMEN, 2007). Even participants who felt their parents modeled poor commitment desired to have strong commitment in their relationships based on love and mutual support.

Some participants did draw a distinction between being committed for commitment’s sake and being committed because of genuine happiness and desire to do so. Both Ella and Nichelle viewed their grandparent’s marriage as more of an adherence to a legal contract than as a model of true love and satisfaction. Nevertheless, both of these women expressed emotional closeness and happiness as characteristics of commitment. However, as Wiegel et al. (2003) also pointed out, a substantial number of students in this same sample also feel love and happiness are necessary for relationship success. A substantial number of these students felt relationships can be impermanent due
to the absence of love and happiness, which leaves relationship dissolution and divorce as a viable option (Weigel et al., 2003). Nichelle’s and Shamika’s parents divorced when they were teenagers and they both felt a sense of relief after the divorce because their parents were unhappy during their marriages. In a sense, these participants were faced with determining the value of maintaining commitment to a relationship in the context of low satisfaction and high conflict. The data from this study provided a glimpse into how Black collegiate women construct their understanding of commitment and the manner in which they appraise truly committed relationships.

**Trust.** Commitment, as pointed out by Wieselquist et al. (1999), influences the level of trust present in a relationship. Guarding interpersonal trust in relationships was a major theme among the women in this study. Interpersonal trust can be defined as an individual’s belief in the “…integrity of another person” (Larzelere & Huston, 1980, p. 595). Burton et al., (2009) was able to determine that trust is often situated in context and given and withheld in various ways among distinct populations. This study was able to provide firsthand accounts of the ways in which trust is given by Black collegiate women who have yet to marry or have children. Several participants developed distrust for men and partners through experiences in which they had been deceived or mistreated. These women desire commitment in their relationships, however, they described findings themselves in relationships where the level of commitment is imbalanced.

These experiences tainted the notion that intimate partners should give their trust freely and completely. If these women had embraced the idea of complete trust at some point, experiences that heightened their vulnerability to heartache and embarrassment worked to transform their prior views on extending trust to partners. Several women
preferred to trust their partners, but with caution. Women described behaviors that illustrated this cautious trust, such as going through their boyfriends’ phone, eavesdropping in their boyfriends’ conversations, being cynical of their boyfriends’ female friendships, and adopting a slight skeptical attitude toward their boyfriends’ actions.

These attitudes toward withholding interpersonal trust have important implications for relationship development. Trust facilitates self-disclosure, intimacy, and commitment, which all enhance relationship quality and stability (Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985). The absence of trust often breeds contempt and other negative emotions, which are detrimental to the growth of a relationship. In lieu of withholding trust and engaging in behaviors that potentially induce stress and anxiety, women should be mindful of warning signs and patterns in their relationship that point to dishonesty and deception while still extending a trusting relationship to their partner until an untrusting attitude is warranted.

Extending total trust to someone is difficult for many people, especially when you see and hear evidence of dishonesty in your everyday environment. Some participants were given messages reinforcing generalized gender distrust toward men. One participant’s mother, Mashia, warned her that “…all guys are sneaky…” and she adopted this ideology for herself. Other participants discussed the lack of fidelity they repeatedly witness in many relationships on campus. In empirical and scholarly work, Black female-male relationships have been characterized by distrust at both the dyadic and community levels (Chapman, 2007; Douglas, 1999; hooks, 2001) This distrust is often portrayed in the cultural products targeted toward Black consumers in film, television, and music. In
her writings on love relationships in the Black community, hooks (2001) describes the negative portrayals of Black male-female relationships in film. hooks continues with recommendations for more positive images of Black relationships in film, “Yet until different images can be imagined in the minds of both those who produce images and those who are trying to build relationships in real life, the loving bonds we seek cannot emerge” (p. 181). The consumption of cultural products that depict dishonesty and mistrust in Black male-female relationships may work to normalize these negative patterns in reality.

Applying Thomas’ (as described in LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993) concept of the definition of the situation to the development of interpersonal trust among women in this population could increase our understanding of their behaviors in intimate relationships. This important social-psychological principle suggests we cannot understand the behavior of an individual without understanding her perception and meaning of the environment in which she is acting out the behavior (Thomas, 2002). Since trust is such an important marker for relationship success, further research is warranted specifically examining the antecedents of trust development among understudied populations (Burton, 2009).

**Conflict resolution.** Communication, conflict management, affect regulation, and collaboration between partners have been consistently cited as predictors of relationship quality and stability (Gottman & Levenson, 2002; Orbuch et al., 2002; Wiley, 2007). Couples who maintain generally high levels of positivity handle conflict with more ease and civility (Gottman, 1994; Gottman & Levenson, 2002). All of the women in this study desired harmony in their relationships. Many of them learned to manage conflict by
observing their parents’ conflict resolution techniques within their relationships. If parents were able to resolve conflict in ways their daughters perceived as positive, the daughters expressed using similar strategies in their relationships. If their parents engaged in ineffective or destructive patterns of conflict resolution, the participants attempted to develop their own strategies of effective conflict resolution.

Participants acknowledged several elements necessary to positively manage conflict, such as accepting differences in opinion, using assertive communication, regulating stress during conflict, seeking solutions, and employing forgiveness. These are all strategies consistent with the literature on effective conflict management (Gottman & Silver, 1999). In a similar vein, some participants also identified patterns in their approach to addressing conflict that undermine effective conflict management, such as using passive communication, holding grudges, name-calling, aggressive behavior, and withholding feelings from their partner. As a whole, the women in this study portrayed a good understanding of effective conflict management even if they fell short of consistently putting these positive behaviors into practice. Their understanding closely aligns with many of the characteristics of the Manage core component in the NERMEN model, which leads to positive conflict management. Some of these characteristics include: (a) managing differences that occur in values, beliefs, expectations; (b) utilizing perspective taking and empathy for partner’s view; (c) managing the stress response during conflicts; (d) using forgiveness skills; (e) welcoming repair attempts; and (f) using positive interpretations, judgments, assumptions and attributions (NERMEN, 2007). Findings from this study provide an indication of how conflict resolution is carried out among Black collegiate women in serious relationships. However, measuring their level
of knowledge of appropriate conflict resolution skills across this population warrants further attention.

**Implications for Practice**

The findings from the present study revealed several needs and challenges among this sample of Black collegiate women. Despite these challenges, the women did describe cognitive and behavioral processes that led to positive outcomes for them on both personal and dyadic levels. Education and programming provide promising avenues to address intrapersonal and interpersonal challenges for these women and significant individuals in their lives. The findings also provide mental health professionals and university personnel with firsthand information on the unique personal and contextual issues this population may experience.

**Specialized relationship education for Black collegiate women.** Evaluations of several existing premarital educational curricula have shown promising outcomes in improving essential skills necessary for successful, committed relationships (Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Jakubowski et al., 2004). Despite the known behavioral and knowledge gains from couple relationship education, there is relatively less known about the effectiveness of relationship education for young, single and unmarried adults, especially those from diverse backgrounds. Relationship education during this stage is critical because young adults are continuing to develop their attitudes toward marriage while also being engaged in more serious mate selection and dating practices (Erikson, 1950; Hawkins, Carroll, Doherty, & Willoughby, 2004). Decisions made during this stage of life are likely to affect successful transitions into future stages across the life course, especially entry into healthy, sustainable marriages and relationships (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2004). Additionally, relationship education can also provide a clear picture of
healthy relationships and increase confidence in having a successful, enduring, and intimate relationship, particularly among population whose confidence to maintain a healthy relationship is waning (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Providing models of healthy relationships becomes critical because many young people have been unable to observe healthy couple relationships and marriages, as it may have been missing in their family and community life (Fein et al, 2003; Edin & Kefalas, 2005).

The women in this study offered several suggestions to improve relationship development among Black collegiate women. These suggestions will be helpful in developing an original specialized relationship education program targeted toward this population, particularly when additional research is conducted which supports the findings from this study. Additionally, these suggestions can also inform cultural adaptations of existing relationship education programs. Providing individuals with programs that speak to their unique contextual and cultural circumstances can improve program efficacy. In prevention science literature, researchers acknowledge the importance of both effectively addressing fidelity as well as fit. Preventionists strive to adapt effective universal programs and interventions while also remaining responsive to the cultural needs of a local community (Castro, Barrara, & Martinez, 2004). Castro, Barrara, and Martinez (2004) encourage moving beyond aesthetic adaptations, such as modifying graphics and hiring ethnically matched educators, to deeper structural adaptations, which refer to attending to the core values, beliefs, norms, and other unique aspects of a cultural group’s world views and lifestyles. Illuminating the cultural nuances of a specific cultural group may also prompt higher consumer participation.
There are specific adaptation strategies to address the unique features of a cultural or community group. These include (a) cognitive information processing characteristics, such as language and developmental stage; (b) affective motivational characteristics, such as gender, ethnic background, religious background, socioeconomic status; and (c) environmental characteristics related to the ecological aspects of the local community (Castro, Barrera, & Martinez, 2004). To develop or adapt a program for Black collegiate women, a practitioner should address the early and emerging adulthood life course position as well as contextual, structural, and cultural issues in the Black community as well as the college campus community.

There is a lack of empirical research on the efficacy of culturally adapted programs and original specialized programs targeted toward a specific population. Limited published research on specialized relationship programs for Black women or college students in general can be found in the literature. In regard to the college campus community, Neilson et al. (2004) developed and evaluated a college course, *Marriage 101*, designed to educate college students on the psychology and sociology of marriage and marital success. In the developmental stage of the course, 50 undergraduate students were interviewed about what they wanted to know about intimate relationships. This information contributed to the final framework for the course.

In his guidelines for adapting existing programs, Backer (2001) suggests assessing community needs. One way to assess community needs related to intimate relationships is interviewing members of the population as described above to explore their experiences, successes, and challenges, which is what I performed in the present study as well. Drawing upon insider perspectives and experiences can inform the
development of a specialized relationship education curriculum and make it more relevant to the targeted population.

**Recommendations for a guiding conceptual framework.** The National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Network (NERMEN) advanced a comprehensive conceptual framework of healthy couple relationships including seven core components. This framework could easily used in a specialized relationship education curriculum and adapted to reflect the unique needs and experiences of a targeted population. The NERMEN model (NERMEN, 2007) core conceptual framework was developed as an empirically and theoretically guided framework to inform the development of educational programs and resources regarding relationship development. Based on thirty years of empirical work on relationship development and relationship quality, the National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Model (NERMEM) focuses on core dimensions in the creation and maintenance of healthy couple relationships; (a) Choose: the central important of intentionality; (b) Know: the development of interest, affection, and closeness; (c) Care: Demonstrating kindness, affection, understanding, respect and caring support; (d) Connect: engaging social support, community, and sources of meaning; (e) Share: developing and maintaining friendship, positive interactions, and meaningful time together; (f) Manage: strategies of engagement and interaction around differences, stresses, and issues of safety; (g) Care for Self: maintaining physical, psychological, and sexual health and wellness as an individual (NERMEN, 2007). I recommend the NERMEM because it is particularly suited for developing programming for college students because the model includes a core component of self-care that touches on stress management, sexual health, self-esteem, and awareness of impediments
to physical and emotional well-being, which are all important issues in a college setting. Self-esteem and identity development have been cited as critical issues for young Black women, particularly in the formation of romantic relationships (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Stephens & Phillips, 2005; Tucker, 2003).

Practitioners should also consider infusing Black feminist concepts into curriculum designed for Black collegiate women. Black feminist thought champions the power of self-definition. A self-defined standpoint is articulated as the development of your own self-identity and worldviews while resisting denigrating images of the Black women often perpetuated through dominant societal structures (Collins, 2000). The idea of standpoint offers Black women the space to assign meaning to their unique realities. Black feminist ideas can be helpful to Black women when clarifying their personal standpoints regarding race, gender roles, expectations, and dating decisions and behaviors (Henry, 2008). Black feminists also champion an activist view to their work which values not only the presence of Black women, but their active involvement as well (Collins, 1991; Few, Stephens, & Rouse-Arnett, 2003). Within a program framework, Black women can be supported and empowered to spur social action to resist denigrating images of themselves and their relationships and to also encourage others on campus to educate themselves on healthy relationship development.

**Recommendations for content.** As mentioned earlier, the women in the present study shared their opinions on the relationship education needs of the Black collegiate female population based on their own personal experiences and observations of their peers. A prevailing theme among the participants was the inclusion of content focused on personal development in relation to self-love, self-identity, and self-agency. For the
participants, strengthening these areas seemed to be precursors to developing a healthy relationship with someone. There is the sense that a woman should be a complete person, value herself, and know what she wants out of life before committing to a relationship. Participants stressed the importance of establishing personal goals as well as expectations and standards for a mate and a relationship. The women in the study determined the lack of a clear sense of self can be detrimental to the success of a relationship.

*Self-love and self-acceptance.* One participant, Brittany, believed individuals who fail to love themselves will find it difficult to love someone else. She thought self-love and self-acceptance should definitely be included in a relationship curriculum for this population. Brittany said:

> I think, like being able to love yourself first should be talked about, learned. You know, being able to accept all your flaws and, you know, the good things and the bad things about yourself before you’re able to try to, you know, be in a relationship with someone.

Brittany explained why self-love and self-acceptance are important for women:

> …I feel like it causes a lot of insecurities if you don’t. Like you really don’t and insecurities inevitably lead to, you know, arguments or sometimes infidelity, like you feel like you have to get attention from other guys because he’s not paying you enough attention. Or, you know, just being able to like accept your flaws and the good things about yourself …Or if you get criticized about your flaws, not breaking down because, ‘Oh my gosh, he said I was fat’ or whatever. Just being secure with yourself and who you are.

Brittany conceptualized the absence of self-love and self-acceptance breeds insecurity which may then lead to infidelity in a relationship. In her writings on self-love among Black females, hooks (2001) describes a similar sentiment, “To choose love, we must choose a healthy model of female agency and self-actualization, one rooted in the understanding that when we love ourselves (not in a selfish or narcissistic way), we are best able to love others.” (p. 41).
Most relationship education programs do not purposefully address self-love and self-acceptance, but rather exclusively focus on couple interactional processes. In fact, participants rarely mentioned couple interactional processes when discussing the needs of their peers in intimate relationship development. A positive sense of self may serve as a signal to women to distance themselves from situations that threaten their well-being. Through a grounded theory study with Black college women who left psychologically abusive relationships, Few (1999) discovered low self-esteem was a salient feature in why some women stay in unhealthy relationships and have their self-esteem further undermined by abusive male partners. In contrast, high self-esteem facilitated the ability for some women to leave their partners (Few, 1999). Since issues of self-esteem, self-sacrifice, and mental health are relevant to college women and to many Black women, focusing on personal development as the foundation for healthy relationship development is important.

**Self-reflection.** Engaging in self-reflection in order to facilitate awareness of personal goals, expectations, successes, and challenges appeared to be a positive strategy for women in the study as well. Several participants mentioned that women should think about what they desire in a mate and relationship prior to entering a relationship. Some participants also promoted taking time to reflect between relationships about successes, challenges, and missteps, so they can work toward improving their personal development and future relationship development. In her group therapeutic work with Black women, Boyd-Franklin (1989) observed that her clients had challenges with unresolved issues in previous relationships which affected the quality of their present relationships. The presence of ‘relationship baggage’ often adversely affects relationship quality and
perceptions of a partner (Vanzant, 1998). Gottman and DeClaire (2001) suggest learning your emotional heritage as well as your partner’s to foster positive growth in a relationship. Emotional heritage refers to an individual’s upbringing, life experiences, and enduring vulnerabilities (Gottman & DeClaire, 2001). Addressing these issues prior to entering into a serious relationship may work to benefit relationship development. In a relationship education curriculum designed for this population, self-reflection as a personal exercise should be included as a part of the course.

*Identifying warning signs.* The women also suggested the inclusion of content and exercises on identifying red flags or warning signs of unhealthy relationships. As the women discussed their relationships, there were notable signs of emotional abuse, manipulation, and control in their relationships. However, the women did not label these instances as negative experiences despite the stress or anguish they experienced within these relationships. When women are able to put an appropriate label on negative behavior of a partner, they are in a better position to acknowledge the behavior for what it is and determine what action they may want or need to take in the future. Although none of the women in the study mentioned violence in their relationships, it is a major problem on college campuses. More often than not, dating abuse does not begin with overly egregious behavior, but rather an escalation of negative patterns sometimes ending in aggressive, violent episodes (Short et al., 2000). It is important for women to recognize these patterns in behavior and take appropriate action. Additionally, even if potential or current partners are not violent or abusive, women should be encouraged to listen to themselves when they feel unhappy or uncomfortable with the direction of a relationship or dating situation.
Communication skills. Information on assertive communication should also be included in programs offered to or designed for this population. Several of the participants discussed their inability to always communicate their emotions and thoughts to their partners, either out of fear or wanting to avoid hurting their partner’s feelings. Being able to openly express your thoughts and feelings can alleviate personal stress, internal conflict, feelings of victimization, and resentment. Assertiveness allows someone to stand up for their beliefs while also respecting the views of others. Muting their own viewpoints sometimes left these women feeling confused, sad, and at odds with themselves. Several of the participants acknowledged the importance of speaking up for themselves and letting their voices be heard. Assertive communication can boost self-esteem and self-agency as well as cultivate effective conflict management in a relationship. Sexual assertiveness has been demonstrated as a challenging skill for young Black women to master (Rickert, Sangvhi, & Weimann, 2002). Similar to relationship expectations, it is important for women, particularly young women to communicate their sexual beliefs and desires effectively. Through the voices of the women in this study, including communication skills as well as a focus on personal development in a relationship education program or workshop would be beneficial to Black collegiate women.

Male partner participation. It is worthwhile to consider designing and including a component in a relationship education curriculum for this population where their male partners are invited to participate and learn. Several of the women in this study complained about the quality of communication, conflict resolution, and other important relationship variables within their couple unit. Having both partners engage in learning
together about relationship dynamics may have a stronger impact on the quality of the relationship compared to only have one partner equipped with this knowledge.

**Recommendations for parenting education.** Several participants observed effective strategies of communication, conflict management and relationship maintenance and actively chose to adopt these strategies in their own relationships due to seeing them work for their parents. It is important for parents to know their children may adopt positive patterns of interaction demonstrated in their parents’ relationship if perceived as effective. Parents should be encouraged to engage in effective communication and conflict resolution around their children, granted it is age-appropriate subject matter. If parents seize opportunities that allow children to observe positive strategies to maintain and enhance relationship quality and satisfaction, children will be in a better position to apply pro-relationship behaviors once they begin dating and subsequently enter serious intimate relationships. Conversely, parents should be encouraged to keep negative patterns of communication to a minimum because research does show children often adopt these patterns for themselves (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). Some of the participants in this study that observed or overheard constant arguing, aggressive behavior, and negative communication patterns among their parents experienced adverse emotions as a result. Parenting education programs and relationship enrichment programs should emphasize the power of observation and include content educating parents on being positive relationship models for their children.

Additionally, practitioners who facilitate parenting education programs should also work with parents on talking to their children about intimate relationships and other sensitive topics, such as sexual involvement. Parents should learn techniques to increase
comfort levels during discussions about sexuality. There were many fathers in the study who offered minimal advice to their daughters about relationships or men. Practitioners should help both mothers and fathers cultivate open, close relationships with their daughters so that parents feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and guidance. Both parents are equally important to the development of their children.

In addition, some of the participants were primarily raised by grandparents. These women received minimal messages about dating and relationships from their grandparents. Research indicates that grandparents as parents experience many challenges raising grandchildren, especially when their frame of reference for raising children is based on an earlier generation (Hayslip & Kaminski, 2005). Educational programs designed to help grandparents transition into the parenting role should also include pertinent information on talking to adolescents, teens, and young adults about intimate relationship development and the relevant issues they face in a contemporary context.

**Recommendations for therapeutic work with Black women.** When working with Black collegiate women, therapists should be aware of the cultural and structural contexts these women operate in their everyday lives. Several scholars have highlighted the interpersonal challenges that exist between Black women and Black men (Aborampah, 1989; Douglas, 1999; hooks, 2001). This tension can be identified in the literature, film, television, and music widely consumed in the Black community. Douglas (1999) contends, “Clearly, there is trouble between Black men and women. While individuals may enjoy healthy, mutual relationships of respect, the Black community remains plagued by antagonism between the sexes” (p. 80). Several women in this study
perceived a Black campus community that did not seek to uplift Black couples, but rather tear them apart. Some women also expressed distrust for their female peers. They did not trust the intentions of supposedly plutonic female friends of their partners and some did not trust female friends to give them sound relationship advice. Douglas (1999) suggests engaging in open dialogue concerning gender relations may alleviate this tension.

Therapists can play a role on college campuses in facilitating such discussions among all Black students and between Black females as well. Developing ‘sister circles’, spaces where Black women can share stories with others like themselves, can help these women define their personal standpoint and encourage them to form healthy self-identities (Henry, 2008; Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003).

Millennial Black collegiate women, those graduated high school in the new millennium, also face an unbalanced campus dating scene. Black collegiate women comprise 64 percent of the Black population on university and college campuses across the country (NCES, 2010). For Black college-educated women who desire to marry a college-educated Black man, they will face imbalanced gender ratios. As women face the potential dilemma of securing a partner with similar educational attainment, they also experience issues with expanding their dating pool to men outside their race (Henry, 2008). Despite more progressive attitudes toward interracial dating among contemporary Black college students compared to previous generations, some studies have revealed that a substantial number of Black collegiate women prefer to date within their race (Cuyjet, 2006; Kitwana, 2002). Henry (2008) suggests many Black women may have a strong sense of connection to Black men because of the supportive roles they have played in their lives and their communities. For Black women who feel allegiance to Black men,
interracial dating could be perceived as betrayal. Such dismal prospects and associated challenges may affect mental health among this population. Therapists and counselors should be aware of these potential dilemmas when they work with Black women in college. Some women in this study experienced challenges in finding their voice and also allowing their voice to be heard.

Black women are less likely to seek mental health services compared to White females (Alvidrez, 1999). Some Black women may be reluctant to seek therapy or counseling if they are experiencing personal or relationship challenges due to the mental health stigma in the Black community (Corrigan, 2004). Research has shown many people in the Black community rely on informal support networks and spiritual practices to resolve personal issues and relieve psychological distress (Ward, Clark, & Heidrich, 2009). Since spirituality is a major coping strategy among in the Black community, mental health professionals working with Black college students may want to consider integrating spirituality into the treatment of Black collegiate females (Boyd-Franklin, 2010). Mental health services can help Black collegiate women to address similar issues they have in intimate relationships and dating situations. Therefore, campus communities should engage in public awareness campaigns normalizing mental illness and giving information on access to campus and local mental health services. Engaging in public awareness campaigns about mental health and associated services would benefit the entire campus community.

Aside from the stigma associated with seeking professional mental health services, Boyd-Franklin (1989) cites common issues that emerge in group therapy with Black women including; a general pessimism about intimate relationships, a diminishing
pool of marriageable mates and its impact on family formation, and the impact of unresolved issues in past relationships on current relationships. Collectively all of these issues compromise relationship formation and maintenance among this population. Therefore, therapists should encourage women to engage in self-reflection to strengthen self-identity, address unresolved relationship issues, and explore family of origin influences.

**Recommendations for peer relationship education.** Several participants made references of distrust toward their female friends to give sound relationship advice. Some participants felt single girlfriends were not in a good position to give good advice because they were not in relationships. There was also a sense that some participants felt the Black campus community did not respect Black couples on campus. Mashia even said she learned to keep her relationship business to herself. Nevertheless, the women reported going to friends for advice or venting about a relationship challenge before going to a mental health professional. Ward and Heidrich (2009) found that African Americans frequently turn to friends and informal support systems to cope with mental health issues. A peer education program focused on intimate relationships may position girlfriends and other women as more reliable resources. These girlfriends would have the opportunity to offer relationship advice based on research-based information.

Peers have a strong influence on individual behavior during the college years (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Female students could attend training programs developed and facilitated by mental health professionals, student services personnel, and researchers, which offer information on personal rights, self-care, identifying signs of healthy and unhealthy relationships, and strategies to talk to girlfriends about various
relationship issues. Historically Black sororities would be an ideal channel for the delivery of a peer relationship program targeted toward this population. Other peer education programs, which have focused on alcohol and drug issues, health issues, and violence prevention, have shown promising results on college campuses (Bernert & Mouzon, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; White, Park, Israel, & Cordero, 1999).

**Directions for Future Research**

**Expanding eligibility criteria.** Given the exploratory nature of this research project, several directions for future research were identified with Black collegiate women. In the future, more research should be done to expand the current research model to include more participants and also explore additional variables. This study only included women who were currently in exclusive, serious relationships. It would be beneficial to expand the eligibility to women who are not currently in relationships. Several of women in this study made references to the small number of Black students on campus in serious, committed relationships. Given their perceptions and the reality of an unbalanced campus dating scene, it would be advantageous to gain the views of Black collegiate women despite their relationship status. Most of the women in this study had been in their relationship for at least a year. Their narratives on relationship experiences may be somewhat different from women who have been navigating the dating scene and dealing with the potential stress of mate selection. Gaining the insight of Black collegiate women not currently in relationships may also provide a more comprehensive understanding of this population and how they construct their understanding of intimate relationships.

**Social context.** In addition, I would also like to explore more variables related to social context. Social context can include anything that involves the social system. It goes
beyond the intrapersonal (i.e. individual) and interpersonal level (i.e. family, peers, significant others, co-workers, etc.). Social context includes social systems such as communities, organizations, and institutions. Social context also refers to the norms, values, information, and public policies governing these social systems (McLeroy, Bibeau, Steckler, & Glanz, 1988). In this study, I was able to gain a great deal of information about the pathways through which Black collegiate women form their personal standpoint and interactional approach related to intimate relationships at the intrapersonal and interpersonal levels. Exploring the influence of various social systems, popular culture, and social and political media could provide further insight into relationship socialization among Black collegiate women.

Furthermore, the Black church is an enduring, symbolic, influential institution for the Black community (Patillo-McCoy, 1998; Taylor, Chatters, Jayakody, & Levin, 1996). It would be interesting to understand the impact of specific moral directives related to relationships and intimacy communicated in the Black church. In general, the Black church has consistently communicated sexual conservatism (Barnes & Bynum, 2010). However, Black females and males continue to have the earliest rates of sexual debut and females continue to experience high rates of teen and unintended pregnancy even though these figures have decreased in the last fifteen years (The National Campaign, 2010).

Another relevant issue that warrants further attention is the notion of preserving self and placing self first while reconciling that ideal with that of the Bible which is often translated with endorsements of male-headed households, selflessness, and self-sacrifice. For women who accept gendered relationships described in the Bible, they may experience challenges with putting themselves first in a relationship. However, directives
in the Bible are given in the context of a marital relationship, which is distinct from
dating relationships. Another suggestion for future research would include conducting a
mixed methods study with women from this population to determine how they define
both gender roles in dating relationships and also how religious beliefs influence their
definitions of gender roles in dating relationships.

Popular culture is another element of social context that should be explored
further. Popular culture can infuse norms and values into our society that may pose
consequences for intimate relationship development. In popular music and television,
there is a high value placed on sex that often normalizes sexual involvement in dating and
relationships. To illustrate, in hip-hop cultural products, young Black women are depicted
as promiscuous, scantily dressed objects competing for the attention of Black men
(Henry, 2008). The images and messages conveyed in hip-hop products work to
perpetuate longstanding stereotypes concerning race, gender roles, and sexuality. It is
beneficial to understand if and how portrayals of dating and relationships influence Black
collegiate women’s attitudes and behaviors in reality. As I indicated earlier, several
scholars have commented on the negative portrayal of Black relationships in cultural
products, such as film, television, and music and how these portrayals often reflect
reality. Further research on this topic could inform social action and spark cultural
creativity.

**Paternal-daughter communication.** Findings from this study also alluded to
patterns in paternal-daughter communication regarding men, sex, and relationships
among women in this population. Fathers gave blunt yet, limited advice mostly
concerning abstinence and choosing the right partner. Daughters received much of their
advice from their mothers, even though some of this advice was also limited in nature. However, some participants did acknowledge their father’s advice having a positive effect on establishing standards for potential partners. In the future, more research should be devoted to determining the effects of paternal-daughter communication on mate selection standards and relationship expectations using quantitative methods. Three of women in this study grew up with no or limited contact with their father during most of their formative years. Another avenue to explore is the effect of paternal absence on mate selection standards and how a father’s absence affect these relationship expectations.

**Parental relationship modeling.** Parental figures exert a great deal of influence on the personal development of their children in adulthood, especially relating to interactions in intimate relationships. For women in this study, parental figures provided a model of behavior in intimate relationships and marriage, whether positive or negative. When talking about their parents’ relationship or marriage, participants most often said they wanted to adopt the positive characteristics they observed and avoid the negative characteristics they observed in their homes. Family of origin research consistently demonstrates that parental relationship quality and the parent-child relationship are significant predictors of relationship behaviors in adulthood. This line of research tends to follow a social learning proposition that children mimic or imitate the behaviors of their primary caregivers (Bandura, 1977). Only one participant acknowledged adopting an aggressive pattern of communication because she was exposed to similar patterns of interaction in her household. On an attitudinal level, Jalia said she promotes seeking marriage counseling to address issues because she observed the positive impact counseling had on her parents. Other women in this study discussed the interactional
patterns they would like to avoid, however, they did not acknowledge adopting or imitating negative patterns of interactions in their parent’s relationships. More specific probing and possible quantitative research would need to be done to exact the level of imitation in the adult child’s relationship based on the parents’ relationship among this population.

**Summary**

The findings summarized from this exploratory study contribute to our understanding of relationship socialization among Black collegiate women. Their narratives offered insight into the construction of their identities, definitions, attitudes, and behaviors regarding intimate relationships. On the academic level, the information gained through this study provides several avenues for further research on this topic. On an applied level, the women in this study identified many needs and challenges this population faces that can be addressed through programmatic and therapeutic work. Most importantly, this study provided a space for these women to share their stories, reflect on their experiences, and offer their wisdom, so other women like themselves who read their words can be encouraged to enhance their personal well-being and move boldly toward the relationships they envision for themselves.
Appendices

Appendix A: Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

Office of Research Integrity
IRB, JACUC, RDBC
315 Knobaud Hall
Lexington, KY 40506-0057
859 257-9428
859 257-8959
www.research.uky.edu/ori/

TO: Alishia Shipley, M.S.
Family Studies
315 Funkhouser Bldg
Campus 0034
PI phone F: (502)588-9072

FROM: Chairperson/Vice Chairperson
Non-medical Institutional Review Board (IRB)

SUBJECT: Approval of Protocol Number 10-0041-P45

DATE: March 3, 2010

On March 3, 2010, the Non-medical Institutional Review Board approved your protocol entitled:

A Phenomenological Study of the Relationship Experiences of African American Collegiate Women

Approval is effective from March 3, 2010 until March 2, 2011 and extends to any consent/assent form, cover letter, and/or phone script. If applicable, attached is the IRB approved consent/assent document(s) to be used when enrolling subjects. [Note: subjects can only be enrolled using consent/assent forms which have a valid "IRB Approval" stamp unless special waiver has been obtained from the IRB]. Prior to the end of this period, you will be sent a Continuation Review Report Form which must be completed and returned to the Office of Research Integrity so that the protocol can be reviewed and approved for the next period.

In implementing the research activities, you are responsible for complying with IRB decisions, conditions and requirements. The research procedures should be implemented as approved in the IRB protocol. It is the principal investigators responsibility to ensure any changes planned for the research are submitted for review and approval by the IRB prior to implementation. Protocol changes made without prior IRB approval to eliminate apparent hazards to the subject(s) should be reported in writing immediately to the IRB. Furthermore, discontinuing a study or completion of a study is considered a change in the protocol's status and therefore the IRB should be promptly notified in writing.

For information describing investigator responsibilities after obtaining IRB approval, download and read the document "PI Guidance to Responsibilities, Qualifications, Records and Documentation of Human Subjects Research" from the Office of Research Integrity's Guidance and Policy Documents web page [http://www.research.uky.edu/ori/human-guidance.html?Print]. Additional information regarding IRB review, federal regulations, and institutional policies may be found through ORI's web site [http://www.research.uky.edu/ori/]. If you have questions, need additional information, or would like a paper copy of the above mentioned document, contact the Office of Research Integrity at (859) 257-9428.

Chairperson/Vice Chairperson
Appendix B: Approved Advertisement Flyer

UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY RESEARCH

Individuals needed to Participate in Study on “Couple Relationships”

Researchers at the University of Kentucky Department of Family Studies are conducting a research study to learn about couple’s relationships.

You may be eligible to participate if you:

• are female;
• are African-American/Black;
• are in an exclusive couple relationship;
• are enrolled as a full-time student at UK, University of Louisville, or Kentucky State University; and
• are at least a junior in college.

You will be compensated for study participation.

For more information, contact Ahlishia Shipley at phone: 502-500-9072 or email: ahlishiachipley@uky.edu

UK

UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY

An Equal Opportunity University

www.UKclinicalresearch.com
Appendix C: Screening Questionnaire Script

Thank you for calling about the research. I am interested in learning about the experiences of Black female college students who are in intimate relationships. I need to ask you a few questions in order to determine your eligibility for the study.

1. Are you a female? If no, not eligible.

2. What is your racial ethnic/racial group? If not African American, not eligible.

3. Are you in an exclusive heterosexual intimate relationship? If no, not eligible.

4. Has your current relationship lasted at least four months? If no, not eligible.

5. Have you ever been married? If yes, not eligible.

6. Are you currently engaged? If yes, not eligible.

7. Have you ever had any children or are you currently pregnant? If yes, not eligible.

8. Do you attend the University of Kentucky, the University of Louisville, or Kentucky State University as a full-time undergraduate student? If no, not eligible.

9. Are you at least a junior in college? If no, not eligible.

**If the individual meets all criteria, then I will ask if she is willing to participate in the study. I will arrange a mutually agreed upon place and time to meet for the first interview. Prior to the start of interview, I will tell her more about the study, read the informed consent form, ask if she has any questions, and ask her to sign the form if she wants to participate.

**If the individual does not meet the criteria for the study, I will thank her for her time and interest, but will tell her that she is not eligible for the study.
Appendix D: Informed Consent Form

Consent to Participate in a Research Study
A Phenomenological Study of the Relationship Experiences of African American Collegiate Women

WHY ARE YOU BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH?

You are being invited to take part in a research study about the relationship experiences of heterosexual African American collegiate women. You are being invited to take part in this research study because you are an African American female in an intimate relationship while attending college. If you volunteer to take part in this study, you will be one of about ten people to do so.

WHO IS DOING THE STUDY?

The person in charge of this study is Abilisha Shipley, a graduate student at University of Kentucky Department of Family Studies. She is being guided in this research by Dr. Ronald Werner-Wason, her faculty advisor. There may be other people on the research team assisting at different times during the study.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of heterosexual African American female college students who are in intimate relationships. Understanding the intimate relationship experiences of African American female college students will serve to benefit students, women, scholars, and practitioners who work with this population.

WHERE IS THE STUDY GOING TO TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?

The research procedures will be conducted at the University of Kentucky, the University of Louisville, and Kentucky State University. You will need to come to a location that you and the researcher will decide upon 3 times during the study. Each of those visits will take about 50 minutes. The total amount of time you will be asked to volunteer for this study is about 5 hours over the next month.
WHAT WILL YOU BE ASKED TO DO?

- You will be asked to participate in three in-person, individual interviews that will last approximately 90 minutes each.
  - The interviews will be spaced approximately three days to a week apart depending on your availability.
- You will be asked to complete a demographic data sheet after each interview is completed.
- You may be asked to participate in a follow-up telephone call with the principal investigator to discuss research findings from the study.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?

To the best of our knowledge, the things you will be doing have no more risk of harm than you would experience in everyday life. There is no reasonable basis for expecting your participation in this research to expose you to the risk of serious harm or discomfort. Depending on the information you choose to disclose, you may experience negative emotions, such as sadness or anxiety. In the event that the interviews bring up distressing issues, you will be given a list of campus and community referrals.

WILL YOU BENEFIT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

There is no guarantee that you will get any benefit from taking part in this study. Your willingness to take part, however, may, in the future, help society as a whole better understand this research topic.

DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?

If you decide to take part in the study, it should be because you really want to volunteer. You will not lose any benefits or rights you would normally have if you choose not to volunteer. You can stop at any time during the study and still keep the benefits and rights you had before volunteering.

IF YOU DON'T WANT TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY, ARE THERE OTHER CHOICES?

If you do not want to be in the study, there are no other choices except not to take part in the study.

WHAT WILL IT COST YOU TO PARTICIPATE?

There are no costs associated with taking part in the study.

WILL YOU RECEIVE ANY REWARDS FOR TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

You will receive a $25 gift card to Fayette Mall in Lexington, Kentucky or St. Matthews Mall in Louisville, KY for taking part in this study after the completion of the final interview.
WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION THAT YOU GIVE?

We will make every effort to keep private all research records that identify you to the extent allowed by law.

Your information will be combined with information from other people taking part in the study. When we write about the study to share it with other researchers, we will write about the combined information we have gathered. You will not be personally identified in these written materials. We may publish the results of this study; however, we will keep your name and other identifying information private.

We may be required to show information which identifies you to people who need to be sure we have done the research correctly; these would be people from such organizations as the University of Kentucky. We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information, or what that information is. The interview will be digitally recorded and later transcribed. Numbers will be assigned to participants that will be placed on the files or transcripts to identify participants. If names happened to be mentioned during the interviews, they will be deleted from the typed transcripts. All hard, voice, and electronic data will be kept in a locked file in Anithia Shipley’s office.

CAN YOUR TAKING PART IN THE STUDY END Early?

If you decide to take part in the study you still have the right to decide at any time that you no longer want to continue. You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in the study.

The individuals conducting the study may need to withdraw you from the study. This may occur if you are not able to follow the directions they give you, if they find that your being in the study is more risk than benefit to you, or if the agency funding the study decides to stop the study early for a variety of scientific reasons.

You do not give up your legal rights by signing this form.

WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS, SUGGESTIONS, CONCERNS, OR COMPLAINTS?

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions, suggestions, concerns, or complaints about the study, you can contact the investigator, Anithia Shipley at (502) 500-6072 or (859) 257-5527. You may also contact the faculty advisor for this research project, Dr. Ronald Warner-Wilson at (859) 257-7780. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the staff in the Office of Research Integrity at the University of Kentucky at 859-257-9428 or toll free at 1-859-439-9429. We will give you a signed copy of this consent form to take with you.

Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study ____________________________ Date ____________

Printed name of person agreeing to take part in the study ____________________________ Date ____________

Name of [authorized] person obtaining informed consent ____________________________ Date ____________

Form: Nonmedical IRB Informed Consent Template 32C_NM

University of Kentucky
Revised 8/27/08
Appendix E: Campus and Community Referrals Listing

Listing of Campus and Community Referrals

Bluegrass Healthy Marriage Initiative
216 Scovell Hall
University of Kentucky
Lexington, KY 40506
(859) 257-5527

Center for Research on Violence against Women
108 Bowman Hall
University of Kentucky
Lexington, KY 40506
(859) 257-2737

Counseling and Testing Center
201 Frazee Hall
University of Kentucky
Lexington, KY 40506
(859) 257-8701

The Family Center
215 Scovell Hall
University of Kentucky
Lexington, KY 40506
(859) 257-7755

New Beginnings Bluegrass, Inc-Mental Health Services
(859) 245-2400

University Health Service-Student Behavioral Health Clinic
830 South Limestone Street
University of Kentucky
Lexington, KY 40506
(859) 323-5511

Violence Intervention and Prevention Program
106 Frazee Hall
University of Kentucky
Lexington, KY 40506
(859) 257-3564
Appendix F: Interview Protocol

- Discuss how interviews will be digitally recorded and ask for permission record the interviews.
- No right or wrong answers; I just want to find out about your experiences.
- As you are talking, I’ll listen and ask for further clarification if necessary. I may be quiet, but please continue talking.
- Would you mind if I jot down a few notes while you talk?
- You can stop me at any time and ask me for clarification on any question if needed.

Part 1: The goal is gather each informant’s life history relating to intimate relationship development. This history includes her experiences as well as those of significant people in her life.

As we discussed previously, I am interested in understanding the relationship experiences of young African American women. In this first interview, I would like for us to focus on your life experiences with significant intimate relationships that you have observed and experienced for yourself.

Personal background Information
We can begin with you telling me about yourself.
Possible Probes/Questions:
- Hometown
- Major/Classification
- Extracurricular Activities
- Future Goals

Parental Figures’ Relationship
Now let’s discuss your parents’ (or parental figures’) relationship a bit more.
- Thinking back to your childhood, how would you describe your parents’ (parental figures) relationship?
- Would you tell me about some significant moments that you remember about your (parents’) relationship?
- You can give me a somewhat of a timeline if that is helpful for you.

Parental Relationship Dynamics
Possible Probes/Questions
- How would you describe your parent’s level of commitment to their relationship?
- How did your parents handle conflict in their relationship?
- How would you describe their communication as a couple?
- From your view, how did your parents show caring and support toward each other?
In terms of relationship patterns, what patterns of interaction or communication did you observe in your household that you feel you have adopted or want to avoid your own relationship?

Is there anything you would like to change or see different in your parent’s relationship(s)?

**External Influences**

Outside of your parents’ (parental figures’) relationship(s), would you tell me about the relationships of other significant people (or couples) in your life growing up? What stood out to you about these relationships?

Growing up, what were some of the messages you received about developing relationships from your (parents) and significant people in your life?

- What messages did your mother give you about developing relationships?
- What messages did your father give you about developing relationships?
- What type of person do you think your parents (parental figures) wanted you to be with in the future? Either from what they would say to you or from their actions?
- Were there specific qualities they would say you should look for in a partner?
- How did these messages shape the way you approached dating and relationships?
- Who in your life did you talk to most about issues related to dating and relationships? What types of issues did you discuss?

**Informant Relationship History**

Now, let’s focus on your past relationships. Tell me about your significant past relationships in school and in college?

- What important experiences or events stand out for you?
- Why were these experiences important or significant to you?
- What were some things or lessons you learned as a result of these experiences?

Is there anything else you would like to share that we didn’t cover
Part 2: The goal is allow the informant to reconstruct details of her current relationship by focusing how the relationship was developed and how the relationship is experienced from her perspective.

At our last meeting we talked about your past experiences with dating and relationships. So today, I would like for us to talk about your current relationship.

Current Relationship Development
So we can just begin with you talking about your current relationship.
Possible probes/questions:
- First, tell me about when you first met your partner.
- What attracted you to him? What did you like about him?
- How would you describe your relationship?
- When and how did you know the relationship was becoming serious?
- What happened to make you feel like you were officially a ‘couple’? Was there a specific event?
- How does your relationship make you feel?
- How long have you been with your partner?

How would you say your relationship has changed over time?

Please describe a typical day in your relationship?
- What are some of the highlights?
- Just to help me to understand the impact this event, I’d like for you to complete this sentence: “When [highlight] happens, __________.”
- What are some of the low points?
- Just as before with the highlights, please complete this sentence: “When [low point] happens, __________.”

Partner Background
Tell me about your partner.
- What you do you like about him as a person? What do you value about him?
- What things do you dislike?
- How does he treat you?
- Where do you see your partner headed in the future?
- Professional trajectory
- Academic success

Has your boyfriend met your parents (parental roles)?
Tell me about when they were introduced.

Current Relationship Dynamics
How would you describe your communication styles or patterns in your relationship?
How do you and your boyfriend handle conflict in your relationship?

Will you tell me about an argument or conflict you and your boyfriend have had in the past?

How do you show caring and support to each other?

How would you describe the level of commitment in your relationship?

Where do you see your relationship headed in the future?

What would cause you to leave your relationship? What are deal breakers for you?

If you could magically have your relationship exactly the way you would like it to be, what would your relationship be like?

Possible Probes/Questions:
- Is there anything you would like to change?
- Is there anything you would like to be better?

External Influences
What external forces do you feel affect or influence your relationship?
- How do these forces affect your relationship positively or negatively?

Please tell me about the messages you receive from people in your life now about identifying and forming intimate couple relationships.

Possible probes/questions:
- Parents and Siblings/Family members
- Peers/Friends
- Religious/Spiritual Leaders

How do significant people in your life feel about your relationship?
- Family members
- Friends

How does your boyfriend feel about the significant people in your life?
- Family members
- Friends

What do you feel is unique about being an African American female in a relationship while attending college?
Part 3: The goal is to encourage informant to reflect on the meaning her experiences hold for her.

Now we have talked about your past and present experiences with intimate relationships, today I would like for us to focus on what all of this means for you, how you make sense of it going into the future.

Personal Reflections
What, if any, lessons have you learned as a result of your experiences in your current relationship or other previous experiences with relationships?
Possible probes/questions:
• How do you think you will apply these lessons in your own relationship or future relationships?

What are some of the reasons you have stayed in your relationship?
• Positive or Negative

What do you feel is the best part of being in a relationship?
Possible probes/questions:
• Companionship
• Support

What is difficult or challenging about being in a relationship?
Possible probes/questions:
• What about being in a relationship has been somewhat unique or challenging for you and your relationship specifically?
• Being in a relationship in college
• Maintaining balance between school/work/social life
• Relationship quality issues
• Distance

What, if any, sacrifices do you feel you have made or are currently making to be in your relationship?

What have you learned about yourself from being in your relationship?

What differences do you see in your current relationships compared to your past relationships experiences?

Personal Perceptions
Based on your own experiences, how would you describe a good or healthy relationship?

Will you describe one couple who exemplifies an ideal relationship to you?
If you encountered another young African American female who needed advice on developing a successful relationship, what do you think you would tell her?

Based on your own experiences and observations, what do you feel young African American women should know about developing successful relationships?

• Relationship Education/Programming

Is there anything else you would like to share with me about your experiences?
Appendix G: Demographic Data Form

Demographic Data

Code________

Age: __________

Number of months in relationship with current partner     ________

Classification _______________________

GPA ___________________

Major

________________________________________________________________________

Do you live on campus or off-campus?

____________________________________________

Do you currently have a job? If so, how many hours do you work a week?

____________________
Appendix H: Contact Summary Form Template

Contact Summary Form

Participant Code:
Type of Contact: FTF Int.: __________ Place: _______________ Date: _______
F-up Ph: __________ Place: _______________ Date: _______

1. What were the main issues or themes that struck you in this contact?

2. Summarize information you got or failed to get on each of the target questions you had for this contact.

3. Anything else that struck you as salient, interesting, illuminating or important in this contact?

4. Identify specific existing or new codes/themes prominent with this contact.

5. For next interview, what target questions do you have in considering the next participant contact?
Appendix I: Example Contact Summary Form

Contact Summary Form

Participant Code: 003
Type of Contact: FTF Int.: X #1
F-up Ph: Place: FS CONF, RM
Date: 3/29/2010

1. What were the main issues or themes that struck you in this contact?
   - Participant expressed learning a great deal from mom’s and dad’s respective marriage about what she wants and
doesn’t want in a relationship.
   - Talks to mom about relationship issues a great deal. Her mom has created a open, positive space to communicate
   which allows participant to feel comfortable talking to her about relationship issues.
   - Her mom’s messages seem empowering, uplifting, positive—keeping herself first, loving herself first, not
   settling, she is deserving of the best, not to lose self-identity in a relationship.
   - Dad’s messages are limited to not having sex until marriage or beyond.
   - Has established ideas about what constitutes a healthy, good relationship and one based on ‘love’.
   - Attempts to internalize parental advice, but understands she will have to learn from her own experiences as well.
   - Both parents placed academics and school activities as number priorities for children, instilled this as most
   important aspect of life to place focus, above social life.

2. Summarize information you got or failed to get on each of the target questions you had for this contact.
   - Participant is 20 yrs old, from Hopkinsville, KY. Nursing/Communication Disorders Majors. Involved on campus
   and works. Parents split up at 4, both have since married. Has three older brothers. Has lived with Mom all life.
   - Parents have good co-parenting relationship, some issues with lack of Dad’s financial contributions when older.
   - Describes mom’s marriage as ideal relationship. Dad’s relationship is ideal only in terms of financial stability and
   positive parental interaction with children.
   - Expressed mom’s marriage is based on true love and friendship and dad’s marriage is based on finances,
   convenience and the fulfillment of the ‘American family’ ideal.
   - Parent’s wanted daughter to have a respectful partner, and a relationship where both partner’s feelings and
   opinions are equally valued. Qualities such as honesty, loyalty, and caring are qualities they promoted.
   - Did not get to ask about relationship history due to time.

3. Anything else that struck you as salient, interesting, illuminating or important in this contact?
   - It is interesting that she able to talk with her mom so freely and openly about relationship without fear of
   judgment.
   - Participant expressed feeling so comfortable and at ease when around her mom and stepfather, a feeling which
   opposite of the tension and anxiety she feel around Dad and stepmother.
   - Mom avoided marriage with stepfather for a while, possibly pointing to aversion from marriage because of past
   relationship or just enjoying singleness.
   - Mom gave direct messages about how daughter should view herself in the context of relationship development,
   which someone who deserves the best and who is worthy of respect. She also told daughter about the importance
   of compromise in a relationship. In advice to daughter about current relationship, she acknowledges BF’s
   developmental stage in terms of his maturity level and interpersonal skills.

4. Identify specific existing or new codes/themes prominent with this contact.
   - Message from Mom: Love Yourself First
   - Watching and Learning: Learning through observation of parental and other significant relationships
   - Listen and Learn: Expression of internalizing messages from parents
   - Deficient Direct Messages from Dad: expression that Dad’s messages/advice is limited or nonexistent

5. For next interview, what target questions do you have in considering the next participant contact?
   - What part of Mom’s advice do you think you have applied to life the most?
   - If you couldn’t talk to Mom about relationships, how would that affect your relationship life.
   - Do you wish you could talk to Dad more about relationships?
   - Said dad’s relationship is not based on love, so What is love to you?
Appendix J: Participant Profiles

In this section, profiles of each of the participants are provided. In these profiles, the participants’ experiences related to learning about and developing intimate relationships are described. Each profile includes information about the participants’ families, their past and current intimate relationships, and issues salient to their individual experiences.

Ella

Ella is a 20-year-old undergraduate student. She stands about 5’5” tall and has a slim body build. She is planning to go enter graduate training in the medical field upon graduation and is also fluent in Spanish. Ella has a light complexion and long hair. When we met, she usually had on a fitted baby tee-shirt, jeans, and tennis shoes. She has doe-like light brown eyes and cheeks bones that sit high above her full, mauve colored lips. During all the interviews, she spoke matter-of-factly in her responses about her family and relationships experiences without much elaboration. She spoke with indifference about her parent’s divorce and father’s absence in her life. However, she said that academic success was a priority and discussed her future plans for career development with a great deal of intentionality and sincerity in her voice. Ella was the first woman to volunteer for my study. She found out about the study by seeing an announcement on a television monitor in the building where many of her classes are taught.

Ella grew up in a rural town in the same state as the university she attends. Her mom has a Master’s degree and works in information sciences at a local university. She explained that her father did not attend college. She has one sister who is two years older with whom she has a close relationship. Her sister had a baby about two years ago and
from observing the challenges she faces, Ella felt like avoiding pregnancy when you are not married and in college is definitely important.

During the first interview, Ella spoke apathetically about her parent’s marriage and subsequent divorce. She was seven when they divorced, so she did not remember much about her parent’s relationship. She explained her father’s alcoholism as the main reason her mother sought a divorce from her father. Ella did remember several episodes when her father would come into the house late and intoxicated and how these issues just took a toll on the relationship. She feels she and her sister, who is two years older, were emotionally unaffected by the divorce. After the divorce, her father was in and out of jail and she hardly spent any time with him. When I asked her how that made her feel, she responded, “I really don’t care.” She did not speak about her father’s absence with any outward consternation, but as if she was emotionally disconnected from him and perfectly fine with it. Her mom remarried when Ella was ten. Ella describes being somewhat unaffected by her mother’s remarriage as well. She does not consider her stepfather a father figure. She considers her mom’s new marriage separate from the unit comprised of herself, her mom and her sister. Ella said her mom’s relationship is “…kinda like… her own thing.” She sees their relationship as boring and hopes to have a marriage that is much more exciting and novel.

Ella could not recall any messages her mom gave her about developing good, healthy intimate relationships. She remembered moments where her mom would warn her about avoiding men who were unemployed or ‘deadbeats,’ and her she specifically used Ella’s father as an exemplar of an undesirable mate. Concerning sex, her mom told her to wait until marriage to have sex. Ella told me she never received messages or advice
from her father about relationships or men. She says she did not talk with her sister about these issues either. She explained that her mother’s warnings did not have much effect on the way she approached relationships, but that over time she was able to observe how having a mate without a job or education could negatively influence your life and how “…society kind of looks down on guys that don’t have a job or, you know, if they have several different kids with different people and they don’t take care of any of them…” She expressed that she learned about relationships on her own through trial and error.

Ella is in a relationship that has lasted over four years. Her boyfriend is from the same area as Ella. They began dating when she was junior in high school and he now attends the same university. Both Ella and her boyfriend have prioritized academics over spending time with each other as they have made an arrangement to see each on the weekends mostly only after school work and studying has been completed. Ella expressed having a partner that is goal-oriented and actively working toward a goal as an important characteristic in a mate. Ella knows she will be successful and wants someone on a similar trajectory. She speaks about her relationship with a sense of contentment and confidence. She describes her boyfriend, Greg, as physically attractive, ambitious, and genuinely nice. Her and boyfriend have few conflicts which says are generally resolved over a few days. She admits that she is passive in her approach to resolving conflict and often wants her boyfriend to figure out what is wrong with her and not tell him. Her lack of direct communication frustrates her boyfriend and she acknowledges she needs to improve. Ella also expressed a distrust for outside females interacting with Greg, disclosing to me, “You know how girls how are.” She believes Greg acts naively in appraising his female friendships because many of these females flirt with him, but he
contends they are just friends. She believes females on campus are often sneaky and do not respect relationships and that “…they can just be trifling…”. This sentiment was expressed by other participants as well.

Ella expressed throughout the interviews that her own success was a priority to her. When I asked her if her boyfriend will factor into her plans for attending professional school, she said he would not be a primary factor in her deciding what school to attend in regard to proximity. She was not overly concerned with the stability of the relationship once she moved away and placed their future in fate’s hands saying, “…I feel like if it’s that important then it will endure anything…And if it doesn’t, then it must be for a reason.” There was this sense that her personal goals should be placed above her relationships in a hierarchy. Her main advice to her peers was not to settle for a mate with characteristics that do not meet her standards. She believes many Black women settle for less when selecting mates and stay in unfulfilling relationships. She observed several of her friends in unhealthy relationships and she felt staying when they were not happy was a waste of their time. Through our conversations, Ella definitely seemed focused on her future. Her relationship was obviously important and special to her, but her future success would not be compromised for the sake of making this relationship work.

Tayva

Tayva is a 22 year-old graduating senior. She has a creamy mocha complexion and stands about 5’8” tall. Her long, flowy, dark brown hair sits a few inches below her shoulders. Tayva has a slender athletic build, which is hidden under her mostly causal and sporty attire. Tayva did not wear makeup or jewelry with the exception of small diamond stud earrings and a yellow LIVESTRONG wristband. Tayva has a soft, gentle
voice and speaks with thoughtfulness and honesty when discussing struggles in her relationship.

Tayva contacted me through email about the study. She learned of the study from an advertisement flyer posted on campus. For all three interviews, we met in my office on campus. She arrived about twenty minutes earlier for the initial interview. I noticed her sitting in a waiting area in my building when I was walking to the copy room. I asked her name, introduced myself, and pointed her in the direction of my office. She seemed very pleasant and also a little shy. In my office, we sat in chairs facing each other parallel to a conference table.

In our preliminary discussion, Tayva told me about her background. She was planning to attend nursing school in her home state in the fall after graduating, although she was completing a degree in the behavioral sciences. She grew up in a large, metropolitan city in the Midwest with both of her parents and one older brother who was born three years prior to her parents marrying each other. Her parents grew up in the same neighborhood and ended up dating when they were in their early twenties. Tayva’s told me her mom recently received her Associate’s degree and is working on a Bachelor’s degree in business. Her mom has been working at a scientific abstract service and her father is in management. He has worked at a commercial oil company since she was born and moved up in the company over time. She thinks her father completed some college courses when he was younger.

Tayva says she has a good relationship with her mother and they have become closer as she has gotten older. She believes her mother was somewhat hurt that her only daughter was a tomboy when she was growing up and uninterested in “…all the shopping
and girlie stuff she enjoys.” Tayva says she does not share her feelings a lot, so she likes that she can be open with her mom especially since she has been away at college. When she was younger, she expressed that she was somewhat scared of mother and often avoided her powerful personality. Tayva’s describes herself as a daddy’s girl. However, she also acknowledges they are not as close as she thought as she has gotten older. She knows her father is there for her, however, but they do not have frequent, open conversations. They talk often on the phone, but she says there are these awkward moments where she does not know what else to say to him. She wishes it was not so hard to come up with things to talk him about when they happen to talk.

When talking about her parent’s marriage, she said, “I want a marriage like that.” She describes her parent’s marriage as ideal and hopes to have the same happiness and friendship they share in her own marriage in the future. She admires her parents’ open communication, mutual support, and approach to handling conflict. Throughout the interviews, Tayva referred back to her parent’s relationship as a model relationship and longed for the same relationship in her own life.

Tayva said her mom talked with her about the importance of not losing yourself in a relationship and also establishing an equal partnership. Tayva remembered her mother telling her to make sure she is happy in a relationship and that she maintains her voice and to be careful not to just conform to her partner’s ideas and beliefs. Tayva’s mom also encouraged her to make sure her partner is motivated and goal-driven. Her father, as with many of the fathers of other participants, did not give her messages or advice about relationships or men, but despite this, she believes he wants her to have a healthy relationship.
Throughout the interviews, I learned that Tayva was definitely aware of what she wanted out of a relationship and future marriage. She built this ideal in her mind mostly based on observations of her parent’s marriage. Having a stable, happy, fulfilling marriage and children one day is extremely important to Tayva. One of the main issues we discussed was her dissatisfaction with her current relationship because her boyfriend does not share a similar future orientation where there is marriage and children. She and her boyfriend have been exclusive for a little over two years. She had began talking to him as she was still phasing out a previous long-term relationship where boundaries were not clearly defined when she initiated the breakup. Once she was totally done with her ex-boyfriend, she and TaShaun became serious and he finally asked her to date him exclusively after a few months of hanging out. As she tried to find a comfortable position for her long limbs in the uncomfortable office chair, she talked about TaShaun with a warm, almost nostalgic tone as if he and his love for her were a memory. In the beginning, it was TaShaun’s sense of humor, his intelligence, wisdom, and the way he thinks that attracted her to him. Their relationship started out with them hanging out a great deal and a lot of physical affection. Over time, she expresses there was less affection and they spent less time together. She also told me their sex life had become almost nonexistent over the past few months.

There were two major issues Tayva seemed to be struggling with she discussed with me. As aforementioned, marriage and family were extremely important to Tayva, however, TaShaun had expressed to her that he did not want to get married or have children partially attributed to the parental divorce he experienced in his own family. In fact, Tayva had mentioned he told her this about a year into the relationship, but she
thought he may have been joking or may change his mind over time. She told me that she knows his mind is set at this point, however. Not only was he not interested in marriage and children, spending time with Tayva’s family was not a priority for him. Interestingly, she said she had considered foregoing her desire to get married and have children in order to maintain this relationship with TaShaun.

Tayva realized she often puts her feelings and expectations second to the feeling of and expectations of others’. Tayva had expressed to me that a partner not wanting a marriage or children would be a ‘deal breaker’ for her, however, she fought with the idea of breaking up with TaShaun over this because of the emotional investments she has made in the relationship. In a similar vein, she also said lack of physical affection was a deal breaker for her, but she told me the affection had clearly dissipated in her current relationship. Sadly, she expressed continuing the relationship was not the best decision for her, but she explained she cared about him so it was hard for her let go of him. From the look in Tayva’s eyes, I could tell she was hurting on the inside. She told me she cries often when she thinks about TaShaun and her eyes get glossed over with tears when talking about it. She explains that her hurt and anger about his disinterest in her and what is important to her intensifies when she spends time with her parents and their friends because she desires so much to have that friendship, commitment, fun, and family orientation that she sees demonstrated in these relationships.

In our final interview, Tayva told me she had thought about our previous discussion. She said she had realized that the support and caring she shows TaShaun is not reciprocated on his end. She also said she has learned she needs to be more open with expressing her feelings and expectations. From these experiences, she felt it was
important for her peers to have confidence in themselves, develop expectations for their lives and relationships, and also not to feel pressured into stay in relationships that are unsatisfying. There was this sense that she really wanted other women to stand up for themselves and form relationships that make them truly happy. During our interviews, Tayva could explain to me exactly what she wanted out of a relationship and partner, but apparently there was disconnect between knowing what was best for her and actually doing what was best for her.

Brittany

Brittany is a 20-year-old junior double majoring in the health sciences field. Brittany stands about 5’6” tall and has a slightly curvy athletic build she has managed to maintain through regular exercise and healthy eating habits. During our interviews she talked about the importance of having a healthy lifestyle. Her skin is painted with a milk chocolate complexion. At our first interview, Brittany wore fitted jeans and a fleece, zip-up university jacket. Her gold hoop earrings stood out to me because her hair was pulled back into a low ponytail with a slight bend to it.

Brittany was referred to me by another participant, Ella. Ella told me Brittany had been in a relationship for a while and that she and her boyfriend had broken up recently, but that they would probably be getting back together. She also told me that Brittany was somewhat shy, so I may have to pull information out of her. In reality, Brittany did not strike me as shy at all, but very self-assured, well-spoken, and outgoing. She has earned a 3.3 GPA and informed she is going to graduate school also in the health sciences field soon after graduating with her bachelor’s degree.
In our first interview, Brittany and I talked mostly about her mom and dad. Brittany grew up in a somewhat rural area of our state with a large concentration of Black people. In a relaxed tone, Brittany sat back in the cushioned office chair and told me about her parents splitting up when she was four years old and that her parents were never married, but dated seriously for a while up until a few years after Brittany was born. Before going to college, she had always lived with her Mom and her three older brothers. Brittany’s father lives about twenty minutes away from her Mom’s house and on a regular basis, he would either come to Brittany’s city and visit or she and her brothers would go stay with him for the weekend. She says her parents have a great co-parenting relationship with the exception of a few financial issues with her Dad not contributing as much as her Mom would like as Brittany grew older. At one point, Brittany happily thought they were getting back together when she was in middle school, but a permanent reunion did not come to fruition. Despite them staying apart and both getting remarried over time, Brittany told me they have always been on the same page in terms of instilling their children the importance of education and responsibility.

Brittany’s mom was especially influential in her approach to relationship development. Brittany’s mom gave her self-affirming messages about how she should view herself, especially in the context of dating. She maintains that her mom’s main messages centered around two themes which were not to settle and to love yourself first. From talking with Brittany during interviews, she seemed to internalize these messages in the way she carried herself, the way her priorities came first, and the way she appraised her friends’ behaviors with male partners. Her father also told her not to settle, but to be leery of guy’s intentions and not to get whisked away by romantic overtures.
In addition to imparting empowering messages to her daughter, Brittany mentioned repeatedly that her Mom and stepdad provided an excellent model for the type of relationship she works to maintain. Her mom and stepdad married when she was a senior in high school, but had begun dating when she was in the 7th grade. She expressed a great deal of affinity for her stepdad, Kary, and sees him as father figure as well. Brittany explained she felt that her mom and Kary have an ideal relationship pointing out their friendship as the most notable feature of their marriage. When I asked her to tell me about their relationship, she said, “I think most of all they’re friends first. I mean they can laugh and joke and argue and still at the end of the day, you know, they’ll be fine.” She also said she tries to model their style of conflict resolution in her relationship by compromising and addressing issues assertively as they arise. She said she feels good when she is around them and the idea they have each other makes her happy. Conversely, when she is around her father and his wife, she said she senses a certain stiffness about them that stands in contrast to the light, loving feelings she has around her mom and stepdad. Brittany believes their relationship is out of convenience in an effort to meet some ideal American family ethos. She contends they are affectionate with her younger stepsister and stepbrother, but she rarely observes affectionate exchanges between them. The only other redeeming quality she admires about them is their financial management and how they are able to provide for their children.

In her relationship, Brittany said has tried to apply her lessons she has learned from her parents. At the time of our interview, she had been with boyfriend, Rich, for a little over two years. They met when she was a freshman while hanging out with mutual friends. The relationship followed a common progression of hanging out, spending along
more frequently, going out, getting know personal things about each other, and establishing commitment. At one point she said they lived in the same apartment complex, so they were “…attached at the hip.” She said initially she refrained from doing certain things “…girls aren’t supposed to do,” like burping and using the bathroom around him, but over time she got over her shyness and loosened up.

Brittany said she was attracted to Rich’s looks, his goofiness, and his willingness to pursue a difficult major like engineering. She maintained her relationship has been happy with the normal exceptions of him getting on her nerves from time to time. A significant source of most of her intermittent frustration stems from Rich’s insecurity about her friendships and interactions with male friends. Consternation rises in her voice and appears on her face when she tells me stories of Rich acting jealous and being overly concerned with her possibly leaving him for someone else or having platonic friends of the opposite sex. Brittany said she constantly tries to convince him that she is committed to him and then things will get better, but inevitably the issue will rear itself again. Once they broke up for nearly two weeks because she was fed up with him not trusting her. She even said if these thought processes and behaviors continue she would probably leave him for good. Brittany did not feel women should have to sacrifice different aspect of their lives, such as friendships, freedom, or future goals to be in a relationship. She says:

I really try not to like sacrifice. I don’t wanna’ feel like I have to sacrifice anything. Like I feel like, I mean like besides like compromising on like small things I feel like I shouldn’t have to sacrifice anything that I’m truly committed to to be in this relationship. Either you accept it or not.

She was very adamant about Rich taking her at her word. In a similar vein, she said when she leaves to attend graduate school, living near Rich was a secondary
consideration to her. She has seen friends of hers give up their plans and goals to be with their boyfriends and she does not want to do the same.

Because some of the negative situations she observes in her girlfriends’ relationships, she feels it is important for her female peers to stand up for themselves and stay true to the values that are important to them. She feels women should establish their full expectations, standards, and boundaries and be able to communicate them to potential partners. She also said women should be taught the importance of self-love and self-acceptance. Brittany believes that insecurity breeds problems in relationships and such insecurities “…inevitably lead to, you know, arguments or sometimes infidelity, like you feel like you have to get attention from other guys because he’s not paying you enough attention.” Being instructed on acting like a lady was something that she thought should be included in relationship programming as well. One of the last things she told me was women should exercise their freedom when they get to college. Brittany felt women should experience college life for a while and not to be focused on finding a boyfriend. From talking with Brittany, there was a definite sense that she had a strong sense of self-worth and determination and that her happiness or future success would not be compromised because of a relationship.

Charlene

Charlene is a 21-year old junior majoring in the healthcare field. Her rich caramel skin coupled with her dark eyes and brows makes her quite striking. At the time of our first interview, her silky dark brown hair sat about two inches below her collarbone before she cut it into a bob-style right above her shoulders before our second interview. Charlene is about 5’5’’ with a curvaceous body. She is involved in several campus
organizations and works as a tutor a few hours a week, which leaves her with a tight schedule. When she graduates from her program, she is going to enter a PhD program in administration in her field. She wants to go out state for graduate school because she wants to experience being on her own. Charlene jokingly added that her favorite color was purple and she likes palm trees.

Charlene preferred to meet me in my office in the evening after her classes ended. At our first interview, she wore a purple cardigan and khakis with matching pearl earrings and necklace. She was carrying her books in a tote displaying the colors of the sorority she was initiated into earlier in the semester. She also had a box of cupcakes with her that her classmates had bought her because her grandmother had recently passed away. I had actually met Charlene about a year prior at a meeting for a Black women’s group on campus to which I was a mentor. When I met her downstairs in my building, we exchanged hugs and went right up to my office which became the routine for each interview, with the exception me giving a ride to her apartment a couple of times because it was too late to walk on campus alone when the interviews ended.

When Charlene would speak, her hands would speak as well as she moved them about when emphasizing certain points in the stories she would tell. All of interviews lasted nearly two hours. Charlene would tell me stories and how she felt about her experiences with hardly any prompting from me. She spoke with a delightful, proper tone and really explained herself almost as if she had previously been giving a great deal of thought to the issues we discussed. Despite many challenges during her childhood, she talked about her family experiences with a matter-of-fact tone, saying simply that “…you know, stuff happens.”
When speaking about her family, Charlene gave me somewhat of a chronological timeline. Her biological parents divorced when she was three years old. After that she went back forth between living with her grandmother and living with her mother because of her mom’s substance abuse and subsequent periods of time in correctional facilities. She is not fond of her father, so she rarely talks to him despite her close ties with some of his other family members. She is the youngest of her father’s five children, which include three daughters and two sons. For the most of her youth, prior to coming to college, she lived with her grandmother in a mostly suburban setting. She did tell me that at one point she and her little brother and sister had moved back with her mom in Section-8 housing development when she was in middle school. She recalls living here as a cultural awareness experience because she had lived around White people for the most part up to this point. It was not until attending a diverse middle school that she realized that she had different hair than other Black students.

They lived with her mom until their mom was caught with drugs and sent back to a nearby correctional facility. This was a violation of her mother’s probation, so she received about a five-year sentence. Charlene describes this experience as being hard because her mother was away during all of her high school years and did not get to experience her mom attending her high school graduation or seeing her off to college. She believes her mom is getting better now. She is school now and recently received custody back of Charlene’s little brother and sister who were eleven and twelve, respectively. Her mom and Vance are living together again. He was released from prison soon after her mother. Charlene hopes that things will work for her mom and Vance for the sake of her little brother and sister because she wants them to have the mother-father
setting she did not have growing up. Charlene told me she wished her mom would have been around when she entered her dating years so that she could impart motherly advice about relationships and men because she did not have anyone older and wiser she felt she could talk about these issues. Her grandmother’s sole messages on the subject were simply to not get a boyfriend until after she graduated from college. When her mother tries to give her advice now, she appreciates it, but it would have come earlier so she could have possible avoided dealing with a range of negative relationship issues.

Charlene said she coped with issues during this period by staying super busy and avoiding discussing challenging situations. At one point, she stopped going to visit her mother at the correctional facility because she did not want to hear promises about being released soon only to get let down when this did not happen. When she lived with her mom, she said she spend a great deal of time at her girlfriend’s house and fused herself into the stability and care of her friend’s family. When she lived with her mom, her home life was somewhat unstable. Her mom had a long-term live-in boyfriend, Vance, who Charlene considers a father figure. She said he has always been good to Charlene and her siblings, but that he has a less than desirable history with criminal activity. Charlene told me she would see them fight and argue frequently. She told me a story where they had gotten into a violent altercation and Charlene’s mom had yelled to her to hit Vance with a cooking pan.

In our second conversation, Charlene told me about her current relationship with ‘Everett.’ She and Everett had started dating the first semester of her freshman year, but Everett initiated a ‘break’ earlier in the semester of our interviews. He told her he needed some space to be able to find himself. However, despite the break, Charlene and Everett
still resumed doing most of the same things they did as boyfriend and girlfriend.
Charlene said she constantly asks Everett what he wanted from her, but he would always give her ambiguous, unclear answers about their status telling her just to let things flow. She said they still argued a lot, still questioned each other about interactions with the opposite sex, and still acted as if they were together around his friends. She said she did not want to pretend to be his girlfriend and not have the promise of commitment and fidelity.

During the break, Charlene said the only times they would really hang out is when she would do his hair and come over to her place to do laundry. She felt like he was still getting the benefits of having a girlfriend but not having to make it official. Charlene expressed really wanting to work things out with him, but she said she was getting tired of all the stress and all the crying. She acknowledged that she put him first above her priorities so many times, but he consistently placed her last in his hierarchy of importance. Charlene would tell me several stories where Everett would postpone important dates and cancel on her to handle fraternity business or hang out with friends. Once, he had cancelled their one-year anniversary dinner to hang with his fraternity brothers. Even though he insisted on them staying on this break, Charlene would tell me he would still act upset with her over such things like dancing with a guy at a party, not answering texts or phone calls right away, or when she tries to distance herself from him. Charlene acknowledges this situation caused her difficulty in concentrating and she engaged in empowering self-talk telling herself she would be alright without him in order to cope with her feelings. She said:

…I have just been like Everett is not the end of the world. Like if it doesn’t work out with him, it’s okay. I don’t have to be with somebody right now. And, if I do
happen to find somebody, what’s wrong with finding somebody that actually makes you happy?

With a dejected look on her face, she said that during their relationship Everett has maintained friendships with other females Charlene feels are inappropriate and boundless. She has often seen these friendships as coming before her when she feels that she was supposed to come first as his girlfriend. She takes issue with the fact he has posted profile pictures with him posing with his female friends on Facebook when she has never been in one of his profile pictures and she has been his actual girlfriend. Despite her acknowledgment that Everett acts as if he does not want to be back with her officially, she said she was not ready to totally end their relationship. Charlene told me:

Now, I’m not just saying that I am just willing to walk away and let everything go and just say forget you, forget everything about you. But, I’m like tired of fighting for it. I’m tired of feeling like I’m the only one fighting for us.

She did express some fear about being alone because she had not been single since she was in high school. When she reflected on their relationship, she said she felt somewhat responsible for him not respecting her time and just expecting her to drop everything when he needed something.

She also attributed part of their dynamic to their age difference. When they began dating Charlene was a freshman and Everett was a senior about to graduate. She admits she thought that because Everett was older he was automatically wiser and more mature, so she went along with a lot the things he told her about how relationships are supposed to work. Over time, Charlene said she realized that he was no more mature than she was and began questioning behaviors that did not feel right to her. She added she disliked that fact his parents pay many of his bills when he is nearly 25 years old and he has full-time
job. In her eyes, his credibility as a ‘grown man’ diminished. Charlene’s friends did not like Everett at all. In fact she said they may as well start an ‘I Hate Mark Club’ because of how they hated the way he treated her.

Charlene also reflected on what she wanted to do moving forward. She said she definitely wanted to start putting herself first and “…being a little selfish.” If she could start over, she said she would have made sure she and Everett developed a friendship first because she felt doing so would have cultivated more respect and consideration in their relationship, which she felt was lacking. If another young woman came to her for advice on developing a healthy relationship, she said she would tell her to put herself first, not to be so available to a guy, and develop a friendship prior to developing a romance.

Charlene said she desired a lot more for herself and knew the situation was not good her, but she wanted to end it on her own terms.

**Jalia**

At the time of our interviews, Jalia was 25 years old and completing her first year in a PhD program. Jalia received a fully-funded fellowship for her program and plans to conduct research with older adult patients and their medication adherence. Her complexion resembles the color of butterscotch and dimples appear on her full cheeks that almost try to hide her brown eyes when she smiles. When we first met, she had her medium-length brown hair pulled tight into a tucked ponytail and sunglasses placed on the top of her head. Jalia was generally casual in dress. She is about 5’7’’ with a busty figure. She laughed often while telling me stories about her family and her past relationships.
Jalia said she did not have much of a social life on her new campus, but contends she really does not have time with the workload in her graduate program. She said she is pretty much confined to hanging out with other students in her department. Jalia learned about the study from seeing a flyer posted on campus and called me to find out more information. For all of our interviews, we met in the conference room in my department.

In our first interview Jalia told me about her background and how she arrived at the current point in her life. She grew up living with both of her parents. She is an only child. She was adopted when she was a baby. All she knew about her biological parents was that they were 13 and 15 years old when she was conceived. Jalia said her mom was very open to helping her locate her biological parents, but she says finding them or getting to know them is not that important to her. She and her parents are from the South. She attended a Division 1 college also in the South where she earned a Bachelor’s and two Master’s degrees in the social and behavioral sciences.

As she talked to me about her parent’s relationship, she pointed out a few things she would adopt and avoid in her own relationship. Her parents had been married for over 40 years and she said she admires their dedication and commitment to each other over the years. She described their marriage as “…nothing really terrible, nothing spectacular either…just kind of your normal run of the mill relationship.” To her knowledge, her parents were totally faithful to each other and demonstrated a great deal of support and love for one another. Her mom had battled breast cancer and she said her dad dropped everything to take care of her and be there through the illness. She does recall periods of conflict marked by constant arguing. She believes most of their arguments arose over how to best discipline Jalia. To address these issues, her parents sought counseling as a
remedy. Jalia believed the therapy was helpful and remembered her parents being very
dedicated to the exercises they were to do at home. She voiced a positive opinion of
therapy because of how it helped her parents and also because of her background in
psychology. From observing her parent’s conflict resolution style, she said she would
want to approach things somewhat differently. She said she would like to change the fact
there seems to be no resolution to some of their arguments. She would like to be able to
sit down with her partner and talk things out completely. If you do not talk things out,
Jalia says you miss out on the opportunity to further understand someone and possibly
avoid conflict in the future. She also said when she has a family, she would like to sit
down together for dinner. Over the years, she said dinner time had become a
disconnected event in the house, but that she would enjoy eating with her own family.

Jalia said she has great relationship with her mother and talks to her the most
about personal issues. She feels good about being able to be open with her mother.
Between both her parents, her mother was the one to give her the most guidance on
relationships. Her dad’s advice in this realm was very limited, but Jalia did not mind at all
not talking to him about guys and dating. She said his standards her incredibly high to the
point that she did not want to bring anyone to meet him and until she was about to walk
down the aisle. Laughingly, she told me that her father had recently bought her a popular
book, *Act Like a Woman, Think Like a Man* by comedian Steve Harvey, and simply told
her, “Read this.” She expressed this would be the extent of most of their exchanges about
relationships-short and simple. Both of her parents encouraged to find a partner who was
equally yoked in terms of educational attainment. Jalia parted from parent’s opinion in
this respect. She favored someone with future goal orientation over someone who has the same level of education:

…my thing is like you don't have to have the same education that I do - probably that's going to be hard to find, not to toot my horn. But I just want somebody who works hard, you know. And so my parents are always like ‘Well, find somebody who likes similar things as you,’ and it’s not really about that – it’s your drive, like do you work hard? If you drive that trash truck - not that I want somebody who drives a trash truck - but do you drive that trash truck like hard? Like do you work hard at it?

She said some of parent’s messages had an impact on her in terms of her not settling, but she said she would never settle anyway. However, she maintained that education is not for everyone, so she would definitely consider someone with passion and drive to do something they loved.

In her first serious relationship in college, her boyfriend, José, did not have the same level of education as she did but she described him as a hard worker. Jalia said the relationship had a great start. However, things took a turn when Jalia would encourage him to pursue other avenues of employment, so he could make more money for his time. José began using his lack of education against Jalia saying things like, “You know I'm not as smart as you, I didn't go to school.” An ongoing source of conflict for them stemmed from his limited financial resources. Jalia said he wanted to be the man in the relationship, but often did not have enough for them to go out on a date. When Jalia would offer to help with the small salary she had, this would make José uncomfortable. Trying to avoid sounding materialistic, Jalia demurely admitted that she likes gifts sometimes and also being able to go out and not have worry about the check all the time, which happened often in their relationship. This, coupled with José’s insecurities, pushed Jalia to end it with Jose. From this relationship, she said she learned you have to
sometimes be careful with a man’s ego and also communicate your expectations early in the dating process.

In her next relationship, she said she did actually communicate her expectations early in the relationship. Jalia told me, “When I moved onto Rico I was like “Let me really evaluate the situation and see what he’s all about before I go jumping in here and having the same thing happen again.” She believes doing so made the relationship develop on a more positive note. Shortly before she moved to begin her doctoral program, she began dating, Rico, a Puerto Rican guy she met through mutual friends during the summer. They had been exclusive for about eight months. She says she misses Rico a lot, but she says the long distance is somewhat of a benefit because she has more time to study. She likes that Rico is handsome, neat, flexible, and willing to accommodate her needs. Jalia told me Rico has two small children. This would have turned her off in the past, but she enjoys their relationship so much, she was willing to readjust. Rico is unemployed, but actively engaged in the job search process. He was enrolled in a graduate program, but dropped out of it before they began dating. Jalia is supportive of his goals to enter the music industry, but did not quite know how he was going break into the business. At the time of our interviews, Jalia and Rico had been discussing the idea of Rico coming to live with her while she was in school and looking for job in her new city. She said Rico would definitely have to get a job if he lived with her. Throughout the interviews, she expressed she wanted a man who was self-sufficient and successful. Although she would date someone with less education and less income, she said she preferred to be in a relationship with someone where money was not an issue.
In our final interview, Jalia told me there was value to reflecting on past situations and learning from your experiences. She said her friends do not take the time to reflect on their relationship before beginning new ones and always end up with the same negative results. In a relationship education program for her peers, she says self-reflection should definitely be included. She felt other young Black women should also learn the importance of maintaining their own identities in a relationship. Throughout our interviews, Jalia expressed importance of learning from your past. She used the lessons she learned in her dating experiences in an effort to make her future relationship healthier and more fulfilling.

**Nichelle**

Nichelle is about 5’4” and appears to easily fit into a size four or six. Her complexion is creamy mocha and her slightly slanted-shaped eyes reveal her partial Korean ethnicity. Her hair lays straight slightly curved under in a medium bob style. As she told me about her life and her family in our interviews, Nichelle always had a poised demeanor sitting with her back straight, hands folded together in her lap, and legs crossed at her ankles.

When she began college, she majored in pre-med but later decided she wanted to be a teacher. She plans to teach high school science and math because those are areas in which she is good, she told me laughingly. She also is going to attend graduate school at some point. She was recently initiated into a historically Black sorority, which she said keeps her busy. She said she feels proud of where she is in her academic career even though she changed her plans along the way.
In our first interview, Nichelle began by telling me she considers herself a ‘military brat.’ She has lived all over the world, but she says she has adjusted to life in a rural, somewhat slow state. Prior to moving to college, she lived in a smaller city located near a large military installation in the same state. Her father was in the Army, so her family was stationed overseas a great deal while she was growing up. Nichelle does not know her biological father. In an embarrassed tone, she told me she did not know his name. She does know he was on drugs at some point and that he is Korean and Black. Nichelle said does not feel the need to talk to her biological father because if he wanted to talk to her or find her, she said he would have. The person she refers to as her father raised her and adopted her. Nichelle’s adoptive father and mom had Nichelle’s older sister when they were teenagers. After this, they dated, parted, reconnected, later married and had Nichelle’s other sister who is two years younger than Nichelle. Nichelle’s older sister would have turned 28 years old in the year of our interview, however, she told me tearfully her sister had been murdered during her freshman year two years earlier. Her sister was murdered by her son’s father. It’s hard for Nichelle to talk about her sister, but she said it helps. Her sister’s son is now six years old and lives with Nichelle’s mom. Having her nephew around makes it easier for her to cope. She told me some of the things her nephew does that remind her of her sister.

Nichelle’s parents divorced about four years prior to our meeting. She said she felt a sense of relief when her father told her about the divorce because she was tired of the constant fighting. She said they are better off as friends anyway. Jokingly, she said “I wanna say now that nearly half of all marriages end in divorce, I guess we’re normal.”
She contends the divorce has not caused any separation of her family unit. Her parents have a great co-parenting relationship and she is still close to both of them.

Nichelle said her parents fought throughout their marriage. She also recalls consistent infidelity on both sides. When her father was deployed, she remembered her mother having a male companion around who disappeared before her father’s return. She also recalled being around a female friend of her father when they would go on outings without her mom. Despite the infidelity and frequent conflict, she admired her parent’s support for each other. She attributes challenges in their relationship to being so young when they first became serious. She feels they did not know what commitment really meant. Through observing their experiences, however, she said she approaches conflict in her own relationship in a more effective manner and she also denounces cheating in a marriage.

When we spoke about her current relationship, she said she found herself in a somewhat awkward phase in her relationship and her own personal development. Nichelle and her boyfriend, Tim, had been together since they were juniors in high school. She called Tim her best friend and told me she loves him dearly. Because they had been together since they were teenagers, they had been able to watch each other grow as individuals and be there for each other during significant life moments. Regardless of her love for Tim, Nichelle said that over time, she began to notice that there are men out there other than him. She said she often wonders what it would be like to be single, but also commented that if she were single, she would probably want to be in a relationship. Nichelle’s slight annoyance for her relationship partially developed from observing Tim’s apathy toward his education and future plans. Nichelle said she realized she would soon
be emerging as a professional and she often failed to see how Tim was going to be successful when he kept falling behind in coursework due to dropping classes and sitting around the house doing nothing substantial with his time. Nichelle said she was beginning to view Tim with a different lens compared to when they were in high school.

Nichelle explained:

I mean there’s nothing wrong with being attracted to somebody because of their personality but at the end of the day you have to kind of look at what they bring to the table you know I can’t see myself being with somebody that doesn’t try or is a slacker and I’m starting to see these things because I’m looking out for my future as opposed to in high school.

Nichelle said she was starting to value self-sufficiency, intellect, good communication, and maturity in a partner. She contended that personality traits were still important to her, but she really wanted to know how a partner would benefit her life in the future. She questioned Tim’s ability to take care of himself because he often looks to his parents to bail him out of certain situations. Nichelle referred to Tim as a ‘momma’s boy’ and highlighted a contrast between her willingness to accomplish things on her own and his need for others to care for him. At first, Nichelle said she would get on Tim about his grades and future, but now she is only looking out for herself because she is not his mother and those things are his responsibility.

When thinking about being single, Nichelle said she would benefit primarily from only having to take care of herself and not Tim. She felt a sense of responsibility to Tim that she found stressful and worrisome at times. She described a disconnect between them because Tim could not empathize with having a busy schedule and being involved on campus. She felt things may be easier between them if he was involved with something so he could better understand her position. When Nichelle first arrived on campus, she
said she always sat under Tim because he knew more people and was more familiar with the campus. He introduced her to people and helped her get involved on campus. Nichelle explained they were around each other all the time. Now, Nichelle has her own friends and her own agenda and she said her independence has left Tim feeling she did not care about him as much. Although Nichelle disagreed with this logic, she said that was just his way of processing the situation. She did say that Tim’s insecurities about her independence frustrate her. Nichelle said he if is insecure about the relationship, then he does not need to be with her.

Nichelle said the length of their relationship has inhibited her from ending it because she has become comfortable with their situation. She playfully said she would not know what to say or do if she were to meet a guy out because she does not really know how to be single. Her best friend is always trying to ‘hook her up’ with someone else despite Nichelle being in a relationship. Her friend feels Tim does not match Nichelle in terms of character and compatibility. Even though she is content staying with Tim at this stage in her life, she said she was giving herself a timeline to end the relationship if she sees that Tim is not working to meet her standards.

When Nichelle and I discussed how she made sense out of her experiences moving forward, she said experiencing this relationship has prompted her to learn what she really wants in a partner and a relationship. Over time, she learned that Tim does not necessarily fit her expectations for a partner anymore. In the future, she said would take time to figure out what she wants for herself before beginning a serious relationship. She acknowledged the importance of getting to know a partner and taking things slow. Nichelle said she has realized her strong sense of independence and her ability to live her
life without being in a relationship. She recommends other Black women determine personal priorities, reflect on past relationships, and put themselves first in a relationship.

**Shamika**

Shamika stands about 5’5” feet tall with a slender build. She has a light complexion with light brown hair cut into a medium length bob style. Her eyes disappear when she smiles, which is often. Shamika laughed a lot during our interviews and her stories were frequently laced with “seriously?,” and “whatever!” and “OMG!” Even when Shamika spoke about challenging situations, her voice held a nonchalant tone as to convey life is too short to still dwell on things in the past. During the course of the interviews, Shamika opened up more and became even more expressive than she already is on a normal basis.

Shamika is majoring in the business field. Although she is unclear on her specific professional path, she is considering graduate school in the future. She works part-time at a local bank and also volunteers at various places in the community with her sorority. Shamika said she likes working out and was trying build up a regular routine at the gym again.

She grew up on a horse farm less than an hour away from her university. Shamika’s parents divorced when she was in high school. Shamika said she felt a sense of relief when they decided to divorce because they fought constantly in the years leading up to the divorce. She has three older siblings with whom she maintains close relationships. One brother and sister are her dad’s children from his first marriage. Her other sister is her mother’s daughter from her first marriage. Shamika’s dad is retired and her mom works in information science at a university. At the time of our interviews,
Shamika was living with her mother. She said she visits her dad on the farm often. Shamika recalled her parent’s encouraging her to seek a partner who is equally yoked and to also be vigilant of the trust she extends to her people around her. Shamika told me her dad approved of her current boyfriend because of his potential for success and how he treats Shamika.

Shamika and her boyfriend, Jake had been together for almost a year when we talked. She said Jake is her best friend and they have a lot of fun together. She said she loves her relationship and realized even more how awesome it is through our conversations in the interviews. Shamika used the term “…freaking amazing…” to describe their relationship. She said she loves being romantic and often sends Jakes cards, love letters, and homemade gifts. Some their issues stem from Jake acting jealous of her interactions with her male friends. Shamika said these occasional fits of jealousy are tolerable. She acknowledged that some of their arguments are also related to her acting like a “…spoiled brat…” sometimes. They have a unique style of resolving conflict where they sometimes curse, name call, and retreat, but she said they always find a way to resolve the conflicts and move on. She said she would definitely end the relationship if he cheated on her or began abusing her.

Through her experiences, Shamika said one of the most important lessons she had learned is the importance of getting to know someone prior to entering a serious relationship with them. She said she feels like she and Jake know each other well. Her idea of a healthy relationship embodies the intersection of respect, love, and trust. Shamika suggests other women let love find them because when you go looking for it, it usually does not work out.
Janae

Janae is about a 5’6” and has lean figure resembling the body of a ballerina. Her long brown hair falls way below her shoulders. Janae has a pleasant, welcoming smile to accompany her warm, genuine demeanor. She always wore cute, coordinated outfits complemented by jewelry and light eye makeup. Janae told me women should try to look their best and be “…well put together…”.

Janae’s major is in the healthcare field. She plans to work full-time for a few years after she graduates and then she would like to begin a graduate program in her field. On campus, she is involved with professional organizations related to healthcare and she also works as a peer academic coach with younger Black students on campus. She came from out of state to attend the University of Koyot because of the scholarships awarded to her. Janae told me she likes shopping and hanging out with her sister who is a freshman at the same university.

Janae grew up in a rural area in a bordering state. Her parents have been married for 23 years and she has one sister two years younger than her. Janae said she has a great relationship with both of her parents. In fact, she said she does not go one day without talking to them. Janae’s family was actively involved in church and she and her sister always attended Christian private school. During the interviews, she regularly talked about God being the center of her parent’s marriage and how she wanted to follow a similar ethos in her own marriage. She described her parent’s marriage as very loving, mutual supportive, and low in conflict. Both of her parents were involved in decisions regarding household, however, final decisions were left to Janae’s father because her mother views him as the head of their household.
Janae remembered her mother encouraging her to practice forgiveness in a relationship and to make sure her partner loves her. She said her father did not talk to her much about dating and relationship. She laughingly told me about her father making references to having a shotgun out for guys coming to her house. She said wanted a partner like her father who is a loving person and possesses the ability to protect and provide for a family.

Janae has been in a relationship with her boyfriend for nearly two years and she happily said they continue to have that spark between them. In fact, one of the other participants told me she really admired Janae’s relationship. This participant said she always observes a great deal of affection and happiness between them when they are in public spaces. Janae told me they always do fun activities together, such as going to the park, taking pictures, and going to concerts.

We also discussed the role of sex in their relationship. Janae told me she wanted to wait to have sex until she was married on moral grounds, but they ended up having sex a few months prior to our interviews. She said they really did not discuss having sex beforehand, but that “…it just sorta happened.” Janae experiences occasional feelings of shame and regret and has avoided telling her mom and sister because she feels they would be disappointed in her. She reconciles her regret with the possibility of them marrying in the future. In her previous and current relationships, she told me she struggles with openly communicating her thoughts and feelings to a partner. Her boyfriend encourages her to communicate, so she is slowly becoming more comfortable with sharing her feelings with him.
Janae said she has learned it is important to be open in her relationship. She feels her boyfriend has tried to create a space where she can feel comfortable speaking her mind. Janae feels a healthy relationship should be uplifting to the partners. She has stayed in her relationship because it enhances her sense of self and makes her feel good inside. Janae suggested other Black women be ready for a relationship by having themselves together meaning they should have their personal goals in life and expectations for a relationship set in their mind. Janae feels being confident, organized, and classy are qualities that are attractive to a man.

Mashia

Mashia is about 5’4” with a trim build. When we first met, she wore her brown hair pulled back into a stylish ponytail that slightly curled under at the top of her back. Mashia always wore trendy clothes to our interviews. While we talked, Mashia’s brief responses to my questions were often punctuated with a short, nervous giggle. I noticed her bright smile and laidback disposition throughout the interviews. Mashia said she is actively involved with the Black Student Union and cultural center on her campus. She also works part-time at a retail store in town. When she graduates in two years, she is planning to become a classroom teacher. She said she primarily decided to attend this university because her older brother attends there and she was offered scholarships to cover her education.

Mashia actually has two older brothers. She is very close with her brother who attends her university. She is from the state’s largest city, which is about an hour away. She lived with both her parents and brothers up until she left for college. Mashia’s parents have been married for 26 years. She said the longevity of their marriage gives her
a sense of pride because she feels long-lasting marriages in the Black community are a rarity. She said she would love to adopt their dedication to each other when she is married. Her parents rarely argue with the exception of infrequent, major conflicts she remembered while growing up. She said her parents demonstrated love to each other and to the children. Mashia commented, “We’re a tight family.”

Mashia recalled her mom advising her to get to know a partner first before committing to them. Both of her parents told her that guys were sneaky and she needs to listen to what they say. Mashia said she also thinks guys are sneaky. Her father encouraged her to finish college and start her career before dating someone seriously. She said her parents wanted her to be with someone like father, who is caring, trustworthy, and Christian. He also emphasized being with someone who has or is working on a college degree.

Although Mashia did stay clear of getting a boyfriend during high school, she did decide to enter a relationship while she was a freshman in college. She had been dating Ray for approximately a year and seven months. Mashia told me she was attracted to Ray’s physical appearance, sense of humor, and determination to succeed. She said they hang out a lot and joke with each other all the time. Their minor conflicts generally arise from boundary issues with Ray’s female friends. Mashia also told me that Ray had abruptly initiated a break to take time for himself. She speculated he may have found someone else. Although the break only lasted for two weeks, Mashia’s faith in his commitment to their relationship was weakened.

Mashia said she learned it is important to trust someone in a relationship. She said she is working on restoring her trust in Ray’s dedication to their relationship. She is
trying to refrain from jumping to conclusions so easily when questionable situations take place. Over time, she also learned it is better to keep your relationship business to yourself because your friends may give bad advice.

**Toya**

Toya is about 5’5” with round, curvy figure. Her complexion is golden caramel and her full cheeks shine when she smiles. Her hair is dark sandy brown and hangs straight next to her ears. Toya usually wore tee-shirts with jeans and tennis shoes to our interviews. She works as a student worker in an office on campus. She sometimes participates in the campus Christian ministry activities, such as bible study and community service events. When she graduates, she wants to pursue a career in international studies and work overseas, hopefully in Europe.

Toya grew up living with her mother and her maternal grandmother. Her parents divorced shortly after she was born, so they moved in with her grandmother. Her mom bought a house when she was fifteen, but she decided to stay with her grandmother because it was closer to her high school and she just felt comfortable there. Toya moved in with her mother during her senior year and stayed there up until she left for college. She has a little brother, Daniel, who is seven years old. Daniel’s father and Toya’s mother were in a serious relationship until a few months after Daniel was born when they ended the relationship.

Toya considers her mother more of a best friend figure than a mother figure. She said, “My grandmother is more, she’s my grandmother but she’s more of a mother because I call her a lot more and ask her stuff than my mother.” Toya has not seen her father since she was sixteen. Prior to their last visit, she saw him sporadically for dinners.
and various outings. She attributes her parent’s divorce to her father’s other children. When Toya was born, her father had four other children. Since then, Toya has become one of eleven of her father’s children. She said not talking to her father does not affect her much. Toya added, “You would think it would, but it doesn’t.” She said she just became accustomed to having just her mother and grandmother around her. Her grandmother was never married or in a relationship that she could remember.

Toya said she and her mother have similar personalities. They both like to laugh a lot, but Toya commented that her mother does not have as much patience as she does. Toya says she and her grandmother would label her mother as hot-tempered, but nice to people that she likes. She works as a district manager of customer service for a large direct-marketing corporation. Her mother was in college, but decided to leave before graduation when she became pregnant with Toya. Toya said her grandmother advised her not to get pregnant when she left for college. When I asked Toya about any advice her mother had given her, she said she could not recall any messages her mother had ever given her about relationships or men.

Toya did become sexually active in college. Before beginning the relationship with her current boyfriend, she dated another guy toward the end of high school. She said there was this understanding between them that when he was with Toya, he was with Toya and she should not be concerned with how he using his time when they are apart. She said one of her older male cousins that knew the guy was uncomfortable with them hanging because he was 22 and Toya was 17 at the time. She decided to break her virginity with him over her first Christmas break during college, even though they had not talked much that semester. Toya said she was fine with having sex with him even
though they were not in a relationship. She said she considered it just fun and did not have an emotional connection to the experience. However, Toya did say she became less trusting because of the situation with this guy, partially because there were never any official boundaries in their relationship and he was always involved with other women while they were talking.

In her next relationship, Toya said she had to mindful of being more trusting because she was with a different guy in a different relationship now. At the time of the interviews, Toya had been with her boyfriend for about a year and four months. They met in class, became study partners, and eventually began liking each other. She said they have relatively low conflict and they are very supportive of each other. She said her boyfriend does not talk a lot and told me in a comical tone that she often makes fun of him because he is so quiet. Toya said she has to balance her time between studying, working, and spending time with her boyfriend and her friends. She did mention that academics always take priority over her relationship. Toya also mentioned she has to remain vigilant maintaining her identity in her relationship. She has seen some of her friends change for the worse as a result of being around their boyfriends.

Another issue Toya observed among her girlfriends was seeing them spend a lot of their money on their boyfriends who are often living on their parent’s money. She said women should be instructed on discussing money issues with their partners, so they do not end up using all their money on them. Toya also believes relationship education programs should include developing trust as a topic because she struggles with giving trust at times and she also sees her friends engaging in distrustful behaviors in their relationships.
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Academic Preparation

University of Kentucky
Doctor of Philosophy in Family Studies & Human Development (Expected Graduation: May 2011)
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  ▪ School of Human Environmental Sciences – Department of Family Studies

University of Kentucky
Master’s of Science in Career & Technical Education (2005)
  ▪ Specialization: Family Studies
  ▪ College of Agriculture – Department of Community and Leadership Development

University of Kentucky
Bachelor’s of Science in Family & Consumer Sciences Education, Cum Laude (2004)
  ▪ Minor: English
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Professional Experience

National Institute of Food and Agriculture - USDA
Program Specialist 2011 - present

Bluegrass Healthy Marriage Initiative – Department of Family Studies
Research Assistant 2009 - 2010

University of Kentucky College of Agriculture – Office of Diversity
Assistant for Diversity Programs 2004 - 2009

University of Kentucky - Cooperative Extension Service/School of Human Environmental Sciences
Graduate Administrative Assistant 2008-2009
University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service
Family Life Extension Specialist Intern 2007

University of Kentucky – African American Studies and Research Program
Graduate Assistant 2004 - 2005

Teaching Experience

University of Kentucky – Department of Family Studies
Adjunct Instructor 2006 – 2008

Eastern Kentucky University – Student Retention Services
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Fayette County High School, West Jessamine County Middle School
Student Teacher 2004

Publications

Manuscripts in Progress:


Publications Completed:

Presentations


Shipley, A. J. (2009, June). *It’s all about love…isn’t it???: A look at the research on building healthy relationships.* Invited workshop presentation at the African American Healthy Marriage Initiative Research to Practice Annual Conference, Chapel Hill, NC.


Awards & Honors

School of Environmental Sciences
- Graduate Student of Distinction 2011

Southern Regional Education Board
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University of Kentucky President’s Commission on Diversity
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University of Kentucky School of Human Environmental Sciences
- Future 100 Centennial Award Recipient 2007

University of Kentucky Graduate School
- Lyman T. Johnson Graduate Fellowship Recipient 2004 - 2005
University of Kentucky College of Agriculture

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