

# Black Female Millennial College Students

## *Dating Dilemmas and Identity Development*

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The literature regarding millennial college students reveals that they differ in many ways from their predecessors, including Baby Boomers and Gen Xers (Coomes & DeBard, 2004; Howe & Strauss 2000; Oblinger, 2003; Woodall, 2004). Born after 1981 and graduating from high school in the new millennium, this population of students is not only the largest generational group in the nation's history, but also the most racially and ethnically diverse (Broido, 2004; DeBard, 2004; Howe & Strauss 2000).

While the characteristics and attitudes of the millennial generation have been presented by several researches (Broido, 2004; Coomes, 2004; DeBard, 2004; Howe & Strauss, 2000; Oblinger, 2003; Woodall, 2004), their focus has been from a Eurocentric cultural perspective. However, it is important to note that a unique aspect of the millennial generation is its distinct hip-hop culture, which has roots in African American (used interchangeably with Black in this article) and Latino life-styles.

Often described as a form of creative expression of the collective consciousness of African American and Latino youth, hip-hop culture has national demographic appeal (Ayanna, 2007; Kitwana, 2002)

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that cuts across race and class (Kitwana). According to Coomes (2004), the hip-hop cultural movement is multicultural and has influenced everything today from music and movies, to clothing fashion and hairstyles, to popular vernacular, politics, and education. Consequently, it is important to focus on hip-hop culture when discussing the dating dilemmas and identity development of Black female millennial college students.

Data from the National Center for Educational Statistics (2005) indicates that approximately 43.2% of millennials are enrolled in college; 57% are female, 43 % are male, 13% are Black, 11% are Hispanic, and 6% are Asian. As indicated by these enrollment data, females outnumber males by 14% and they (females) are forecasted to continue to increase at a higher rate than males among all racial groups of college students (Marklein, 2005).

The trend of higher enrollment patterns among Black females when compared to their Black male counterparts is even more pronounced. For example, females comprise 65% of the Black student population on college and university campuses across the country (NCES, 2005). The grave imbalance between Black women and Black men in college raises several issues that have been ignored regarding the social adjustment and psychological well-being of Black women college students (Kitwana, 2002; Porter & Bronzaft, 1995).

Of major concern are questions about the effects of dwindling numbers of similarly situated Black men on the psyche of

Black women. For example, in what ways is the identity of Black college women, as members of a racial group, influenced by their decisions and values regarding dating or not dating? Afrocentric scholars suggest that significant intimate relationships (Hill, 2004; hooks, 2001) as well as a healthy racial identity (Cross, 1995) and cultural identity (Helms, 1990) are crucial to the welfare of Black women.

The purpose of this article is to add to the discourse regarding current dating dilemmas confronting Black female college students. Racial identity development theory, the womanist identity development model, and Black feminist thought serve as a framework for understanding the challenges and outcomes of Black female college students relative to dating decisions and opportunities. Additionally, commentary regarding hip-hop among millennial college students is presented to highlight the significant impact that this culture has on the dating dilemmas and identity development of Black college women.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Several researchers exploring women's development and outcomes have placed the importance of interpersonal relationships at the center of identity formation (Blackhurst, 1995; Chickering, 1969; Josselson, 1987, 1996; Taub & McEwen, 1991), which suggest that concerns and choices in dating and marriage are among the elements women integrate into their evolving identities.

However, Afrocentric scholars (Hill, 2004; hooks, 2001; Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003) interested in studying love and relationships of Black women and men typically use the lenses of race and gender to view outcomes and issues. Recognizing that the influences on identity formation are multifaceted and that the constructs of both race and gender are deeply embedded in the culture of American society, it seems reasonable to conclude that the dating decisions of Black women are influenced, in part, by their experiences at particular stages of racial and gender identity formation. Hence, it is important to consider racial identity and Black women's perspectives in this theoretical grounding.

### **Racial Identity Development**

William Cross' (1995) Model of Psychological Nigrescence (e.g., becoming Black) has been referred to as one of the most prevalent in the literature for providing insight into the complex understanding of racial identity formation (Evans, Forney, & DiBrito, 1998). His model is based on a five stage process which includes: Preen-counter, Encounter, Immersion-Emersion, Internalization, and Internalization-Commitment. These racial identity stages outline the process of becoming psychologically healthy by shifting attitudes and beliefs about one's self and one's racial group from a dominant cultural frame of reference to using one's Blackness as a cultural frame of reference. Thus, it could be reasoned that the dating decisions of Black women as well as Black men are influenced by their world view at a particular stage of racial identity formation.

### **Womanist Identity Development and Black Feminist Thought**

Increasingly womanist and Black feminist literature has begun to address the multifaceted nature of identity formation of Black women. Similar to Cross' model of racial identity development, Helms (1990) suggested that womanist identity include multiple domains, one of which is gender identity development. Helms' model consists of the following ego statuses: Pre-encounter, Encounter, Immersion-Emersion, and Internalization.

In summary, Helms' model is based on the premise that in order to develop a healthy gender identity, the Black woman must move from an orientation that allows her womanhood to be determined by societal definitions to her own meaning of womanhood based on her beliefs and values. This more positive definition of

womanhood may not necessarily be accompanied by womanist beliefs or social action (Helms).

According to Collins (2002), at the core of Black feminist thought is the concept of standpoint, which suggests that the inherited struggle against racism and sexism is a common bond among African American women. Collins contends that while all African Americans experience racism, they do not experience and/or respond to racism in the same way due to the diversity (i.e., class, age, religion, sexual orientation, etc.) that exists among these women. In essence, the struggles of women to communicate self-defined standpoints represent similar yet distinct processes as they are not generally the same type as those affecting other racial and ethnic groups.

Central to Collins' paradigm is the role of Black female intellectuals "... to produce facts and theories about the Black female experience that will clarify a Black woman's standpoint for Black women" (2002, p. 469). Applied to higher education, Black feminist thought is important in assisting Black college women to effectively deal with the multitude of "microaggressive" indignities (i.e., racists attitudes and behaviors) encountered in their daily campus experiences (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Black feminist ideas are also important in helping Black women to clarify their standpoints (Collins) regarding the intertwining influences of race, gender and dating decisions.

### **Literature Overview**

The literature that follows includes content regarding influences that shape Black millennial college women's dating choices. Due to the indelible effects of hip-hop among the millennial generation, the discussion begins with an overview of hip-hop culture, followed by some perceptions of hip-hop among college students. Discourse regarding dating dilemmas which include the unbalanced campus dating scene, finding something new, and preserving the torch or carrying the baggage are also presented. Additionally, other difficult dating dilemmas encountered by Black college women are outlined.

### **Overview of Hip-Hop Culture**

Hip-hop has been described as both a music genre and a cultural movement which was born in New York City during the 1970s by African Americans and Latinos, but has since spread throughout the United States and abroad (Ayanna, 2007; Kitwana, 2002). From its beginnings, the fundamental elements of hip-hop were

creatively expressed in rapping, deejaying, break-dancing, and graffiti-writing, which depicted social and political consciousnesses of the experiences of African-Americans and Latinos (Ayanna 2007; Kitwana, 2002; Watkins, 2003).

In fact, hip-hop is credited with helping to reduce urban youth gang violence, as some of these gang members replaced physical brutality with hip-hop battles of dance and artwork (Kitwana, 2002). Over the past three decades, hip-hop culture has evolved into an entire lifestyle (Watkins, 2003) that has been propelled (via technology and commercialism) to the "center of a mega music, video and fashion industry around the world" (Ayanna 2007; Watkins, 2003). According to Watkins (2003), "the media and the commercial world took a cultural seed [hip-hop] and spread it across the nation" (p. 3).

Although hip-hop is viewed by some scholars as a positive movement in today's society, oftentimes the critical discourse surrounding it is negative. Several Afrocentric critics (Ayanna, 2007; Engles 2007; Hall, 2003; Stewart, 2004) have been particularly concerned about the sex, violence, materialism, and misogyny communicated in hip-hop culture. These negative aspects of hip-hop often overshadow the powerful potential for this movement to become a catalyst for social justice (Watkins, 2003).

### **Perceptions of Hip-Hop Culture in College**

College professors at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have expressed concerns regarding the degree to which hip-hop is emulated through dress, preoccupation with rap lyrics, attachment to materialistic hip-hop ideals, and what appears to be an academic disconnect among students on their campuses (Coomes, 2004; Evelyn, 2000; Stewart 2004). In fact, Black women at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia, have been especially vocal regarding their disapproval of the denigrating portrayal of women in music videos and movies as well as the negative influence of rap music on Black male and female relationships (Stewart, 2004).

For example many hip-hop videos that are regularly shown today illustrate the mismatched dating scene and promiscuous vying among Black women for the affection of Black men. These "videos portray several young [college-age] dancing women (typically surrounding one or two men) moving their body parts to the beat of explicit lyrics that call women derogatory names that malign them" (Ayanna, 2007, p. 2).

Concerns regarding some of the negative influences of hip-hop culture have also been expressed at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). For example, Hall and Smith (2003) contend that intersectional aspects of hip-hop culture have helped to mask the perpetuation of racism on some predominantly White college campuses from the more casual use of the “N” word to White fraternity members parading in Black face.

Unfortunately, many of the messages conveyed through hip-hop culture reinforce traditional stereotypical ideas about race, gender, and sexuality. Consequently, some of these negative messages may become internalized by Black women; this could impact how successful they are in achieving identity developmental tasks.

For example, Kitwana (2002) warned that Black millennial college women may be particularly vulnerable to the effects of racism because this generation of women has had fewer direct experiences with blatant acts of discrimination than previous generations of Black women. Therefore, some Black millennial women may not be able to immediately recognize it (racism), understand it, or appropriately respond to it due to a lack of undeveloped coping strategies.

### **The Unbalanced Campus Dating Scene**

In past generations, part of the lore of the college experience for women and men was to find a compatible college educated mate with whom to date and eventually marry and raise a family (Barna, 1990; Gallup, 1984). Unfortunately Black millennial college women, interested in a Black mate of comparable academic status, are not as optimistic about their future for dating, marriage and family. Due to the dwindling numbers of eligible Black men in college, resulting primarily from political, social, and economic oppression in America (Hill, 2004), the campus dating scene is out of balance (Cuyjet, 2006).

Not only are women enrolled in college in larger numbers than their male counterparts, they are also outpacing men in terms of their graduation rates (NCES, 2005). For example, there are a half-million more Black women than Black men who are college graduates (Williams, 2006). Furthermore, they are also earning more advanced degrees than Black men (Cuyjet, 2006; Porter & Bronzaft, 1995).

According to Furstenberg (2001), as Black women become college educated, attain advanced degrees, and acquire high paying jobs, the likelihood that they will find a Black male partner of equal educational and economical status decreases

even more. Thus, researchers Furstenberg (2001) and Kinnon (2003) have concluded that a majority of college educated Black women will never marry at all. Many Black women prefer to remain single than date and marry Black men who do not have equal educational status (Cuyjet, 2006; Kitwana, 2002; Porter & Bronzaft, 1995). The harsh truth is that even if every Black man in college selected a Black woman as a mate, there would still be a shortage of 39% for this female cohort (Broussard, 2006).

### **Finding Something New**

Not only is finding a mate with an equivalent educational background a challenge for Black college women, Hughes, (2003) suggests that some of these women also experience problems when they seek dating partners outside of their racial group.

The notion of looking outside of one’s race to identify potential dating and marriage partners is the subject of a recent major motion picture entitled *Something New*. This romantic comedy portrays actress Sanaa Lathan as Kenya McQueen, a successful young Black Wharton graduate CPA working her way up the corporate ladder, but without a desirable romantic partner. Persuaded by her friends to find *something new* and abandon her dream for the “ideal Black man,” Kenya begins a journey to romance, meeting a few Black men along the way which she deems undesirable, until she falls for a White male gardener she hired to landscape her backyard.

However, their interracial relationship is threatened not only by Kenya’s own dissonance about dating outside of her race, but also regarding how the relationship will be perceived by her family and friends (Jennepka, 2006). In an interview with the *Philadelphia Daily News*, Randall (2006) reported that “Sanaa Lathan expressed strong identification with the *Something New* storyline because, like her character, she has dated outside her race and struggled with feelings of guilt” (p. 2).

### **Preserving the Torch or Carrying the Baggage**

According to Knox, Zusman, Buffington, and Hemphill (2000), most millennial students have a different attitude regarding interracial dating and marriage than previous generations. In a study that examined the attitudes and beliefs of the millennial generation, Knox and his colleagues found that Blacks more than their White counterparts were accepting

of interracial dating.

Harpalani (1998) conducted a study to determine if Black women perceived that they had viable opportunities to participate in interracial relationships and whether or not these relationships were even of interest to them. Findings from this study indicated that Black women were not interested in dating outside of their own race. These findings were reinforced more recently by Cuyjet (2006) and Kitwana (2002) who also indicated that a substantial number of Black women did not have a desire to date outside of their race.

Perhaps some Black women choose to remain single or date only within their cultural group because they believe it is their duty to uphold the race. For example, Williams (2006) suggested that some Black women have been raised in families with strong values regarding marriage and oftentimes will have experienced parents and grandparents in devoted relationships in which Black men were viewed as protectors of their families. Other stalwart male figures in these families could have been cousins and uncles who also were seen as sources of support and guidance in the up-bringing of these women (Williams).

Therefore, Black women with these types of positive Black male family role models may have a strong sense of connectedness with Black men and may potentially seek the same type of loving and devoted relationships with similar male figures within their race. Similarly, since interracial dating tends to be more prevalent among today’s Black men, some Black women may feel that a major burden falls on them: namely to “preserve the torch” of Black culture by continuing to produce a future race of Black children (Ates, 2002, p. 1).

Additionally, for many Black women, the notion of interracial dating is not appealing because of the “baggage”—amount of stress that might be placed on the relationship due to discrimination or opposition from family (Ortega, 2002). Furthermore, some women perceive that there is a strong probability of being culturally misunderstood by their White partner. Many also assert that they perceive that they not only will not be embraced by the White community, but will also be alienated and shunned by the Black community.

### **Other Difficult Dating Dilemmas**

Among the discussions that Black millennial women are having about dating, in addition to dialogue related to crossing the color line, are conversations that include: disputing notions that there

is a lack of available Black men; remaining in relationships with mates who have multiple sex partners, rather than settling for a life without a mate; debating whether or not standards regarding the educational and financial achievements of Black partners are too high; and considering dating options that potentially involve much younger men (Furstenberg, 2001; Kitwana, 2002; Williams, 2006). In essence there are a multitude of cultural and social issues that confront millennial Black women in their quest to date within or outside of their racial group.

### Discussion and Implications for Practice and Research

Colleges and universities are uniquely positioned and morally obligated to support women in their total development. While college is a stressful experience for most students in general, the added burdens associated with being Black and female, at PWIs in particular, may lead to psychosocial adjustment problems symptomatic of a more serious identity crisis (Jones, 2004).

For example, some Black female college students concerned with dating issues may be at risk for depression, anxiety, anger, guilt, shame, and despair. Interracial relationships can be harder on the Black female psyche, mainly due to reasons such as feeling betrayed, angry, and alone, feelings often attributed to her Black male counterpart who sometimes chooses a White female partner instead of her (Hill, 2005; Jones, 2004).

Additionally, the stereotypical portrayal of some millennial Black female college students as “saucy, demanding, and money-driven” may leave these women with feelings of intentional isolation (Ates, 2006, p. 1) and despair with no hope of finding a life partner. These issues, singularly or combined, can have a negative impact on the personal well-being of Black women in college.

It is, therefore, imperative that student affairs professionals and faculty working with Black female students become aware of the multitude of racial and cultural issues associated with dating on an unbalanced playing field. Attention must be given to Black college women with particular relationship issues and needs by providing them with “a place to describe their experiences among persons like themselves” (Howard-Hamilton, 2003, p. 25) and to “form sister circles and share counterstories in settings which help [Black women to develop stand points] and form healthy identities not based on gender roles or racial stereotyp-

ing” (Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003, p.101).

Multicultural studies programs, women’s studies programs, campus activities programming, and residence hall programming can all be conduits for curricular and co-curricular learning opportunities for Black college women to develop effective coping skills and understand behaviors that lead to mature identities. In addition, counseling centers can utilize group interventions to facilitate the empowerment of Black women who have not experienced the validation of their perceptions about dating within or outside of their cultural group, or their decision to not date at all.

Group intervention can further assist Black women by providing an environment in which they can engage in self-reflective consciousness-raising discussions and develop a sense of connectedness through positive identification, confirmation, mutual sharing, and bonding (Helms, 1990), all of which can support healthy identity formation. In essence, culture-specific psychoeducational learning opportunities in both the curricular and co-curricular experiences of Black women can provide a supportive environment in which they feel empowered to address their dating challenges and other life stressors that thwart positive identity development.

There is a need to better understand the psychological effects a lack of intimate relationships may have on Black women in college, as well as the nature and development of their coping patterns in dealing with dating dilemmas. Research is mixed regarding Black women’s desire to date interracially. Thus, further investigations concerning the social and emotional effects of dating within and outside of their racial group or choosing not to date at all are warranted. Future research should include qualitative and quantitative studies regarding the intersecting influence of race, gender, and dating dilemmas on the identity development of Black female college students.

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