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Young African American Male-Male Relationships: Experiences, Expectations, and Condom Use

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Abstract

HIV disproportionately impacts young African American men who have sex with men (MSM). In this study, we sought to understand how previous relationship experiences and expectations for romantic relationships influence condom use among young African American MSM. Twenty African American MSM age 16 to 24 years completed a semi-structured interview and questionnaire on sexual experiences, romantic relationships, and sexual behavior. We identified three major themes characterizing romantic male-male relationships: (1) partner selection, (2) relationship ideals and expectations, and (3) relationship rules for condom use. Our findings indicate that young African American MSM rely on previous relationship experiences and desires for romantic relationships to determine condom use in subsequent relationships. Participants revealed that their previous relationship experiences and desires are often in conflict with their descriptions of their ideal romantic relationships, and subsequently influences their condom use. Our findings fill a gap in the literature describing male-male romantic relationships and condom use among young African American MSM.

Keywords

African American; HIV prevention; MSM; romantic relationships

Introduction

Despite similar rates of self-reported sexual risk behaviors (e.g., unprotected anal intercourse, number of sexual partners) between African American and white men who have sex with men (MSM), African American MSM age 16 to 24 years have significantly higher rates of HIV. Extant evidence suggests that partner characteristics (e.g., older and African

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American male partners) along with partner and relationship type (i.e., romantic, casual, or sex-only) may influence HIV risk behaviors and explain some of the increased risk experienced by young African American MSM (Arrington-Sanders, Leonard, Brooks, Celentano, & Ellen, 2013; Bauermeister, Leslie-Santana, Johns, Pingel, & Eisenberg, 2011; Mustanski, Newcomb, & Clerkin, 2011). These studies indicate that young MSM may engage in certain sexual risk behaviors (e.g., inconsistent condom use or unprotected anal intercourse with a partner of unknown or serodiscordant HIV status) to express relationship status, intimacy, and seriousness with a partner (Bauermeister et al., 2011; Mustanski et al., 2011). We offer that investigations of partner type and dynamics should be expanded upon to include an exploration of relationship expectations and experiences as these, along with partner dynamics, may further influence young African American MSM sexual risk behaviors (Millet, Flores, Peterson, & Bakeman, 2007; Mustanski et al., 2011).

Relationship expectations among young MSM in general, and young African American MSM in particular, are often complicated by premature romantic ideation, and desires for intimacy, passion, and commitment (Bauermeister, Carballo-Dieguez, Ventuneac, & Dolezal, 2009; Bauermeister et al., 2011). These complications arise for multiple reasons including: (1) difficulty establishing an emotional connection with another man, (2) difficulty negotiating HIV prevention strategies for relationships that do not progress or develop as expected, and (3) lack of dating experience to help differentiate between possible romantic, casual, or sex-only relationships (Bauermeister, 2012; Moeller, Halkitis, Pollock, Siconolfi, & Barton, 2013). Additionally, the ability to meet multiple romantic and sex-only partners through the Internet has changed the way young MSM meet and communicate with potential partners (Taylor et al., 2012). As a result, young MSM find themselves in shorter relationships that do not develop as expected (Bauermeister et al., 2011; Rosser et al., 2011).

Previous investigations of relationship expectations and condom use among young MSM reveal that greater relationship expectations may lead to more consistent (Bauermeister, 2012), or inconsistent condom use (Newcomb, Ryan, Garofalo, & Mustanski, 2014). With respect to consistent condom use, young MSM with expectations for long lasting and committed relationships may use condoms more consistently while they invest more time in getting to know a potential romantic partner and want to protect themselves and their partner in order to build trust; conversely these same expectations may lead to inconsistent condom use as young MSM may forgo condom use to build intimacy and seriousness (Bauermeister et al., 2011; Mustanski et al., 2011; Newcomb et al., 2014).

This discrepancy may be attributed to the disconnect young MSM experience between their relationship expectations and previous relationship experiences, which may in turn influence sexual risk behaviors (Bauermeister et al., 2011). Further, as young MSM are still developing their emotional capacity, they may be inflexible in their thinking about relationship expectations. That is, they may be unable to adjust their relationship expectations of exclusivity, commitment, and seriousness with different partner types (i.e., romantic and casual partners) (Bauermeister, 2012). Nonetheless, we have a limited understanding of why expectations for romantic relationships and previous relationship experiences influence condom use among young African American MSM. In this study, we

sought to understand why previous relationship experiences and expectations for romantic relationships influence condom use among young African American MSM.

Methods

We recruited participants using flyers at an urban adolescent clinic, advertisements on websites where men seek sex with other men (for men 18 years old), and snowball sampling. Most (70%) were recruited through snowball sampling. Participants were eligible if they self-identified as African American, aged 16 to 24 years, and reported having had anal or oral sex with another man (see Table 1). The age range was chosen to capture average age around first same-sexual experience (Bruce, Harper, Fernandez, Jamil, & Adolescent Medicine Trials Network for, 2012), and to allow for developmental differences that may occur between younger and older adolescents. The final number of participants was based on reaching a point of informational saturation in which no additional data were gathered from interviews (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Adolescents (<18 years) who were seeking sexual health information, testing for sexually transmitted infections or HIV, and other confidential services covered under Maryland Law (Article 20-102 Maryland Annotated Code) were allowed to consent for participation. Study procedures were approved by a university institutional review board, and a waiver of parental consent was granted by the same institutional review board.

Data Collection

The study consisted of 20 African American men age 16 to 24 years who lived in one urban metropolitan area and reported having a history of sex with another male. Participants received a 15-minute baseline paper survey which assessed participant demographics, relationship history, and sexual health items derived from prior studies assessing STI/HIV risk in adolescent MSM (Leonard et al., 2010). They also participated in an in-depth, one-on-one audio-recorded 90-120 minute interview administered by a female interviewer in a private office located in an adolescent health clinic. Each participant received a \$45 visa gift card for compensation.

Measures

The semi-structured interview guide focused on participants' sexual experiences, dating experiences, and relationship history. The interview guide was developed with consultation from a team that included a qualitative researcher, an expert in sexual development, and researchers with experience working with young same-sex attracted men. The interview guide was grounded in phenomenological and constructivist frameworks (Schutz, 1970). These frameworks use questions to elicit content and meaning about experiences; and, participants are able to elaborate on responses, provide their own definitions based on life experiences and perceptions, and clarify ideas and feelings experienced within relationships (Schutz, 1970).

Data Analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Topical summaries of a select sample of interviews and participant surveys were written. These summaries were completed

early in the analytic process and were combined with memoing about emergent topics to help guide data discussions. After discussing preliminary findings, thematic codes were developed to categorize the transcripts and develop a codebook. These initial rounds of coding and data discussion with the research team were a weekly iterative process. Once consensus was reached, the first author continued inductive open coding using a grounded theory approach such that emergent concepts were connected across interviews and major themes were identified (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2002). The first and last author independently coded the remaining transcripts using the revised codebook, and reconvened to resolve any coding disagreements to insure high percent agreement between coded sections (Kappa statistic = 0.90) (Campbell, Quincy, Osserman, & Pedersen, 2013).

Results

We identified three major themes characterizing romantic male-male relationships: (1) partner selection, (2) relationship ideals and expectations, and (3) relationship rules for condom use. Results are organized to show contrasts between how men describe their relationship experiences and what they desire in their ideal romantic relationships.

Partner Selection

Participants described partner selection as a process that included: (1) seeking different types of partners and (2) using different venues to meet partners. Partner selection was largely influenced by partner characteristics such as physical features (e.g., masculine, attractive, or well-built), romantic features (e.g., trust-worthy and good communicator), and other partner factors including age, social status, and geographic location.

Partner types.—Participants described two types of partners: romantic and sex-only. Romantic partners were called “*boyfriends*” and “*lovers*” sex-only partners were called “*pieces*”. Romantic partners were described as men who communicated in an intimate and emotional way; sex-only partners were partners who only provided sex. Participants described these terms as one with a sense of permanency and seriousness (boyfriends), and the other as more short term (pieces). Although participants identified and described two types of partners, most struggled to describe the decision making process used to determine if a partner was romantic or sex-only. Most agreed that they knew a partner had romantic relationship potential if they instantly felt like they were “*vibing*” or connecting with that person.

Venues used to meet partners.—Participants described meeting partners through a variety of venues including social networking websites (Internet), gay clubs, the ballroom scene, and local telephone chat lines. The most commonly listed venues were social networking websites and local telephone chat lines. Participants who preferred telephone chat lines liked that they could instantly talk to and connect with a potential partner, which provided them with an increased sense of familiarity and safety.

“Well, the difference is the online requires, it’s very time consuming, it takes up a lot of time...you don’t know what they sound like, and it’s not always guaranteed that you’re talking to the person that’s actually on the computer. On the [telephone

chat] line you have a sense of who you're talking to, where they live at, what area they stay in and who they are."

Other reasons for preferring telephone chat lines included greater privacy and ease in arranging in-person meetings.

In contrast, participants described the type of venue they wanted to meet their ideal romantic partner as a venue not traditionally associated with sex or the gay scene.

"I want to meet them on a random day like a grocery day or a laundry day and then we exchange numbers. One day further into the week we go to dinner, to a movie and sit down and talk to each other about our days and stuff like that, and get to know each other."

The above quotes indicate a disconnect in how participants desire to meet their ideal partners (in non-sexual or hook-up venues) and their behavior of seeking partners using the Internet or telephone chat lines. These quotes also reveal their beliefs about how meeting a partner in a certain type of venue may influence the progression of a relationship.

Relationship Ideals and Expectations

Participants described their relationship expectations as: (1) characteristics of romantic and sex-only relationships, and (2) relationship development.

Characteristics of romantic and sex-only relationships.—All participants were asked to describe characteristics of romantic and sex-only relationships. Most participants said that partners in romantic relationships were expected to be intimately and emotionally connected to each other.

"That's what sex to me is about, no strings attached. Relationships is when you have sex and you also get to know the other person intimately and get to know them."

Participants also expressed that expectations for commitment and monogamy were higher in romantic relationships than in sex-only relationships.

"If we are in a [romantic] relationship, there is no you and I and Steve....Definitely commitment do not tell me that you're just looking for a relationship for a year and then you're ready to hit it."

These descriptions show that participants' expectations for commitment and monogamy were influenced by desires for a certain type of relationship, romantic or sex-only, and not exclusively by the type of partner. Further, these quotes illustrate the role sex has in shifting expectations for a relationship from sex-only to romantic and long term.

Relationship development.—Participants were asked to provide examples of previous relationships and describe how those relationships developed. Older participants (age > 18) commonly described entering into relationships as dating partners – described as sex-only relationships that transitioned into romantic relationships. Older participants also said these

relationships developed quickly, that is, once they had sex, their desires for the relationship to quickly develop into a romantic relationship were stronger.

“I thought it was going to be a one-night stand, he wanted to have sex. So we did it and I instantly caught feelings...and we just ended up getting into this relationship.”

In contrast, younger participants (age <18) described relationship development as a slower process that started with friendship, spending more time with a partner, and then deciding if they wanted a romantic or sex-only relationship.

“I talk to the person for like a couple of, weeks or maybe a month...so I can determine whether I just want to have sex with them or if I want to be in a relationship.”

All participants, regardless of age, described how their previous romantic relationships developed faster or changed once they had sex. As one participant said, *“We were talking and then after the first time we had sex--because we weren't even together. After the first time we had sex, he was like, ‘I want you to be my boyfriend.’”*

Although participants described previous dating and sex-only relationships that developed into romantic relationships, most described desiring their ideal romantic relationships to begin with friendship, abstaining from sex.

“I would have no problem with someone basically that can conversate [sic], that wouldn't mind a friendship first, it evolving into a sort of kind of relationship. Sex along the way is good but not when we jump off out of the gate.”

Participants also described their ideal romantic relationships as relationships that would develop slowly. That is, they would get to know their partner, pay attention to other factors that could affect the relationship such as commitment or emotional intimacy, and make a mutual decision to pursue a relationship or not.

“The ideal place to meet someone--a poetry club or a museum or somewhere more respectable than a bar or a club. And then a date, talking on the phone, chatting pretty frequently, getting to know each other. Then hanging out, watching movies, and doing that for three, four months. Then seeing if we still feel the same, and then we can jump into a relationship.”

The above quote is an example of participants' desires to meet romantic partners in non-sexual venues, and their beliefs that certain venues could influence the way relationships developed. It further suggests that participants' assumptions about ideal romantic relationship development were based on beliefs that engaging in sex at the beginning of a relationship could hinder its development.

Relationship Rules for Condom Use

Most participants expressed having rules for condom use based on partner characteristics and relationship type. Participants described using condoms with sex-only partners, and not using condoms with romantic partners.

“[Rules in sex-only relationships] use protection...you’re partners to this person but you’re not attached.”

Others expressed that condoms should be used in sex-only relationships because partners were not responsible to each other and accurate disclosure of HIV or STI status could not be assumed. *“You don’t know the person, they don’t owe you anything and so you say wrap up.”* In contrast, participants indicated that condom use rules in romantic relationships were made to increase physical intimacy, sexual pleasure, and connectedness.

“Me and my first boyfriend didn’t use [condoms]. Me and [my current boyfriend] stopped using them because it feels better. And it feels more like making love.”

“We were having sex, and we used condoms the first time but I’m like—okay, you my baby. You my lover. I don’t need to use condoms with you.”

The above quotes illustrate how desires for intimacy, trust, and commitment can outweigh concerns for sexual health within romantic relationships. One quote speaks to increased sexual pleasure without a condom, which leads to increased feelings of intimacy; the other quote speaks to desires for trust and a committed relationship that are facilitated by not using condoms.

Participants described that the use, or non-use, of condoms was an indicator of the seriousness of a relationship and the level of trust they had in their partner. However, they also revealed how quickly this rule changed within a relationship, which most often led to inconsistent condom use rather than consistent condom use. As one participant stated, *“Like, me and this person get along really, really well and we can have sex, and not have to worry about other people in the relationship. Because the first time we had sex, we didn’t use a condom. Well no, a lot times we haven’t used a condom, but after like, I had gotten locked up and saw what he was doing on Facebook...it’s just when you set certain guidelines [and] the person breaking them, there’s an issue.”* Others similarly described that feeling connected to a partner led them to not use condoms, but that a lack of trust would cause them to use condoms. Commonly, participants described situations where they were torn between feeling connected to their partner and thus not wanting to use condoms, and not trusting their partner to be monogamous. Younger participants, who had romantic relationships with older partners, acknowledged that they struggled to consistently apply condom rules with these partners, yet they sought older partners to gain access to the larger gay community and the benefits that came with being with a more established partner.

Discussion

Findings from this qualitative study facilitates an understanding of how relationship expectations and previous relationship experiences influence condom use practices among young African American MSM. Our findings support extant literature which suggests that desires for intimacy and expectations for romantic relationships shapes the sexual behaviors of young MSM (Eisenberg, Bauermeister, Pingel, Johns, & Santana, 2011; Moeller et al., 2013; Mustanski et al., 2011). For young African American MSM these desires, coupled with finding partners in more risky venues, may prematurely lead them to not use condoms with a partner who has one or two ideal traits. Driven by desires for a romantic relationship,

young African American MSM may employ HIV prevention heuristics (i.e., use condoms with sex-only partners, and not with trusted romantic partners), but are doing so in relationships that develop and end too quickly for these heuristics to be effective. That is, they prematurely trust partners and transition sex-only partners to romantic partners before commitment, monogamy, or HIV status can be confirmed, thus violating their heuristics.

Partner Selection

Participants met most of their partners on the Internet or local telephone chat lines. Most participants preferred to meet men on a telephone chat line because they believed these men were safer than men met through the Internet. This finding contradicts previous research with young MSM which showed a stronger preference for meeting partners on the Internet (Bolding, Davis, Hart, Sherr, & Elford, 2007; Finkel, Eastwick, Karney, Reis, & Sprecher, 2012). One plausible explanation for this discrepancy is the recent increase in the use of mobile-based or Global Positioning System (GPS) applications for partner seeking (Grosskopf, LeVasseur, & Glaser, 2014). Mobile-based or GPS applications combine the functionality of Internet dating websites—sort and search by partner preferences/ characteristics—with the instantaneous and geographically close nature of local telephone chat lines. These mobile-based applications may also increase the ability for men to cycle through multiple intense relationships in a short period of time (Finkel et al., 2012), before commitment or condom use rules can be established.

Relationship Expectations and Condom Rules

The association between relationship expectations and partner type emerged as a critical factor in understanding condom use practices among participants. Participants' discussed the contention between their desires for romantic relationships to develop slowly, from friendship, and their previous relationship experiences. Our findings suggest that participants' desires for a serious committed relationship may influence relationship expectations and condom use. There are a few plausible explanations for why some participants felt they could not consistently follow their relationship and condom use rules. One plausible explanation is that they may believe an encounter is sex-only, but after connecting, meeting, and being intimate, they begin to believe the relationship is becoming romantic (i.e., serious) and decide not to use condoms to how serious they are about the relationship.

Another explanation for participants not consistently following their condom rules is the use of the Internet and its effect on communication and relationship patterns (Nodin, Carballo-Diéguez, & Leal, 2014; Turkle, 2004). Participants did not explicitly discuss how using the Internet to find partners changed their sexual or relationship behaviors; however, previous literature indicates that the Internet has an impact on MSM sexual behaviors (Adam, Murphy, & de Wit, 2011; Bauermeister, 2012; Nodin et al., 2014). Lastly, observed age differences in relationship development showed that younger participants desired relationships that started with friendship, while older participants discussed relationships that began as sex-only or casual. These differences are important to note as a recent study of young African American MSM showed that younger men are seeking older partners for the financial and emotional support they receive from being with an older and more established

partner, whereas older young men are seeking sex-only partners (Arrington-Sanders et al., 2013). These findings suggest that younger African American MSM may be desiring romantic relationships, believing they are meeting men with similar desires, and are instead meeting older young men interested in sex-only relationships.

There are several limitations to this study. Findings from this study may not be transferable as we examined themes among a small sample of young African American MSM who reside in an urban community with high rates of HIV and other STIs. However, our goal was not to generalize, but to examine the meaning-making and thought processes that occur among this particular group of men to better understand relationship expectations, experiences, and condom use. We did not prospectively examine how relationships changed over time, which limits our ability to draw conclusions when relationships during early adolescence may be different from relationships during late adolescence and emerging adulthood. Lastly, we relied on non-dyadic data to assess relationship factors. Dyadic data would allow for a more thorough analysis of participant relationships by providing access to their partners' relationship expectations and behaviors.

Despite these limitations, our findings fill a significant gap in the literature describing romantic relationships and condom use among young African American MSM. This work suggests that it is equally important to explore why young African American MSM relationship expectations and experiences influence sexual risk behaviors. Additional research is needed to determine if our findings can be replicated in a more heterogeneous sample of young MSM. Additionally, more research is needed to determine available resources for role modeling of healthy romantic relationships for young African American men. Understanding how healthy romantic relationships develop may address some of the discrepancy that exists between relationship experiences and desires.

Overall, greater understanding of romantic relationships among young African American MSM is needed in order to have an effect on HIV disparities. From a research perspective, more qualitative research is needed to better understand how relationship expectations and experiences develop with this population across partnerships. Additional dyadic qualitative research is needed to better understand the steps involved in partner selection and relationship development. This research may reveal how and when differential relationship expectations develop, and how young African American MSM communicate or respond to these differences. Public health campaigns may maximize their effectiveness by considering how the relationship experiences and desires of young African American MSM can be incorporated into prevention strategies. These strategies may include providing young men with tools to facilitate partner communication and condom negotiation—even in romantic relationships, and increasing awareness of the HIV testing window for detectability.

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Table 1:

Demographic characteristics of the study population (N=20)

Characteristic	N	Mean (SD or range), %
Mean age		20.2 (2.14)
HIV serostatus		
HIV-negative	14	70
HIV-positive	6	30
Mean # of lifetime partners ^a		22.68 (38.03)
Mean # of partners in past 3 months		2.16 (3.32)
Current partner status		
Not in a current relationship	6	30
Exclusive relationship with one partner	8	40
Nonexclusive sexual relationship	5	25
Condom use		
Always	12	60
Sometimes	7	35
Never	0	0

^aNumber of lifetime partners ranged from 2 to 150, and the mode is 2.