

Teen Perspectives on Healthy Romantic Relationships Among Racial/Ethnic Minorities

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Overview

- **Teen years represent a critical phase of relationship development**
- **Relationship characteristics may influence sexual and contraceptive behaviors**
- **Most research focuses on adult populations**
- **Teen relationships differ from adult relationships**
- **Focus on racial/ethnic minorities**

Research Questions

- 1. What are the different types of teen romantic relationships and what characteristics distinguish them?**
- 2. What are the critical dimensions of healthy adolescent romantic relationships as defined by teens?**
- 3. Are the critical dimensions of healthy adolescent romantic relationships comparable to those of adults?**

Methods and Sample

- **Focus groups (N=7)**
- **Total males N=16; Total females N=36**
- **Age distribution**
 - **N=33 12-14 year olds**
 - **N=19 15-17 year olds**
- **Largely African American (79%)**
- **Only 31% lived with 2 bio/adoptive parents**
- **73% ever in a relationship more than just friends**

Data Analysis

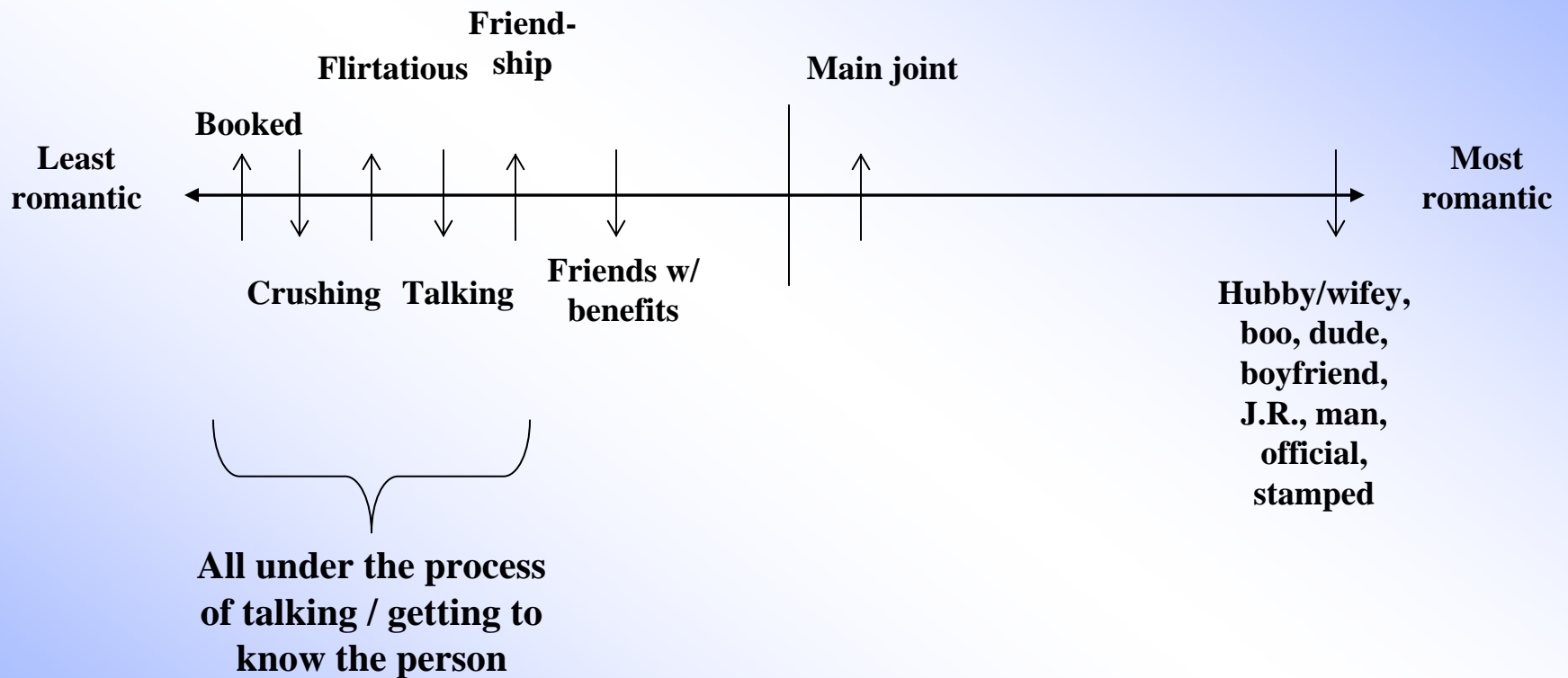
- **Transcriptions and notes**
- **Systematic and sequential analysis**
 - **Debriefings after each focus group; summaries developed into a coding scheme**
- **Themes and patterns identified across the groups and by age and gender subpopulations**
 - **Similarities and differences**

Major Themes Identified in Focus Groups

Theme 1: Teens Have a Rich and Complex Language to Describe Romantic Relationships

- **Language reflects intensity, expectations, and behaviors**
 - *“If somebody’s really serious about you, they may call you “wifey” or “that’s my hubby”. If they’re really really serious. Another level, a lot down is “my boo”. Another level is “my girl, my dude...”*
 - **15-17 year old female**

Relationship Spectrum



15-17 Year Old Girls

Theme 2: Teens Have a Clear Definition of a Healthy Teen Romantic Relationship

Respect is Viewed as Key

- **Respect was identified in all 7 focus groups**
 - *“Respect...is like the most important key of the whole relationship”*
 - *“Y’all gotta have respect for each other in order for the relationship to work”*

-15-17 Year Old Boys
- **Self-Respect:**
 - *“Self-respect. Like, you don’t respect yourself, and you won’t learn to respect others”*
 - *“[Some girls] get treated bad and get called names and stuff, and they still go back to the same guy. Is that respect? ...You’ve gotta respect your own self in order to be with somebody that you actually love”*

-15-17 Year Old Boys

The Public Image of Relationships are Important

- **Girls concerned with how their partner behaves towards them and talks about their *relationship* in public**
 - *“Like if I’m here talking and you see one of your friends and you just walk off, while I’m sitting here talking...”*
 - *“...[or] if he tells you how much he likes you and then when he gets around his friends, he like, “I never did like you!” – dialogue between two 12-14 year old girls*
- **Boys more concerned with how being in a relationship defines their *own* personal image**
 - *“You just wanna look cool in front of your friends...All your friends, all they talk about is...who got that last night.” – 15-17 year old boy*

What's Love Got to Do With It? Boys' Perspectives

- *“If you don't love the person you're with, then why are you with them? Love puts you together...”*
- *“You say you love them, but you don't really mean it.”*
- *“They think that love is like being with a girl, having sex with a girl, and then leaving her...They think that that's love, when it's not.”*

-15-17 year old boys

What's Love Got to Do With It? Girls' Perspectives

- *“Ain't nobody lookin' for love, not teenagers.”*
- *“...I think we need to be more focused on what we need to be doing to get by in the future. I think for teenagers, you can have a committed relationship, you can love your boyfriend but...I don't think you would be on adult terms. It would be simple.”*
- *“It's more like puppy love...”*

-15-17 year old girls

Healthy Romantic Relationships Were Often Defined by the Absence of Negative Characteristics

- **“Not cheating or lying”**
- **“No abuse”**
- **“Not calling them names”**
- **“Don’t hit each other”**

Theme 3: Teen Relationships Fall Short of their Own Standards

- **Cheating**
- **Physical / verbal violence**
- **Lack of respect**
- **Poor communication**
- **Pessimism about adult relationships**

High Standards, Low Expectations

- *“I doubt you can find all of them in one person”*
- *“Good personality, maybe, but you’re gonna get liars; they’re not honest”*
- *“Like for example, okay, one boy can be, you know, honest, respectful, and you have a connection. But, then, he’ll be violent or something”*
- *“...or he’ll be like, too jealous or something”*
 - 15-17 year old girls
- *“[Respect] is not really common...”*
 - 15-17 year old boys

Girls and Boys Agree that Cheating is Common in Teen Relationships

- *“Cause you can’t find faithful in none of them; in none of the guys nowadays.”* -15-17 year old girl
- *“Cause you might have a girl, and be goin with another girl...”* -15-17 year old boy

Teens Distinguish Between Play-Fighting and Violence

- **Play-fighting is common and sometimes can escalate to violence:**
 - *“It all depends. Based on the level of maturity that the people in the relationship are in. They think it’s cool, or sexy... I know a lot of teens like to do playful fights... As far as hitting going out of proportion, that’s not good.”* -15-17 year old girl
 - *“Cause sometimes, you like, just be playing....but then when you start goin for real and hittin each other on the face or the neck...then you want to fight. You should just be like, ‘chill out!’”*-15-17 year old boy

Both Boys and Girls are Perpetrators of Teen Relationship Violence

- **Girls use violence as a way to express their anger or frustration**
 - *“...more like play-fighting, but like in an argument, you just want to get out your frustration, so you hit him, and he hits you back, that sort of fighting.”* - 12-14 year old girl
 - *“...in our relationships, the boys, they really don't try to hit us...it's usually the girls that are hittin.”*
 - *“Like if a girl is mad, she just smack him..”* -Dialogue between 12-14 year old girls

Why isn't the Typical Teen Relationship Healthy?

- *“I don't think none of those qualities are all there because they're not taught to have those qualities. They don't know how to be gentle.”*
- *“Most females, if they don't have a father figure in their life, they don't have these qualities, or if they do have a father figure, they have little evidence.”*
- *“Females may feel a sense of duty to follow the man and just play the same game that he's playing. ...”*
- *“Or they could just be loose. Because they don't have a father figure and they just want attention from a male.*

-15-17 year old girls

Theme 4: Teens and Adults Describe Healthy Relationships Similarly

- **Teens' constructs closely mirror adults**
 - **Lack of domestic violence, intimacy and emotional support, communication, and fidelity.**
- **Boys thought all factors that were important for adult relationships were also important for teen relationships**
- **Girls identified factors not important for teens, but important for adult relationships:**
 - **Commitment, conflict resolution, time together, and satisfaction**

Why Commitment is Important for Adults But Not Teens

- *“You don’t need to make a commitment, cause we’re too young”*
- *“A commitment’s like you’re getting married”*
– 12-14 year old girls

Implications

- **Program providers, policy makers, and parents:**
 - **Importance of role models: In particular, fathers may play a role in developing healthy behaviors.**
 - **Potential benefit of government programs designed to promote healthy relationships among youth**
 - **Awareness and need to discuss full range of teen relationships**
 - **Promoting healthy relationship ideals from an early age**

Implications

- **Survey development:**
 - **There is a mismatch in language used in surveys and language used by teens**
 - **Need to reflect and capture full range of relationships**
 - **Develop measures that are appropriate for a racially, ethnically, and economically diverse population**

Limitations

- **Small sample**
- **Mostly girls**
- **Mostly African-Americans**
- **All groups conducted in Washington, DC**

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