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Love Experiences of Older African Americans: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the romantic love experiences of African American older adults. Popular views on love among older African Americans remain highly subjective, open to the imaginations of other individuals and groups. This study attempts to challenge the popular descriptions of the nature of love among African American elderly by gathering narratives on various aspects of love as told by a sample of African-American elderly. A qualitative design is used to sample, gather and analyze data on love among African-American elderly. Our findings reveal that African American older adults value emotional intimacy. Cultural and historical factors appear to influence the choice of partners in later life. Implications for social intervention are discussed.

Key Words: African Americans, Romantic Love, Later Life, Socio-emotional Selectivity

Introduction

Love as an emotion at the individual level has implications for sexual morality and ethics. The subject of love has been intensively analyzed and critiqued by both philosophers and theologians who hold similar views of love from a social justice perspective (Niebuhr, 1957; Butigan, 2003; Farley, 2006). Both contend that social justice concepts are variously viewed and interpreted by communities in their effort to promote happiness and well-being (Martindale and Saunders, 1992; Jolly, 2005). From a theological perspective, love is considered an essential base for psychological unity, reproduction and appreciation. Lay persons straddle philosophical and theological views of love within the social spaces constructed at the intersections of multitudes of social and demographic characteristics. The perceived meaning individuals hold at various social intersections lays the foundation for a theory of sexual ethics and love. The purpose of this paper is to explore the meaning of love among African American elderly men and women in the United States.

The proportion of the elderly aged 65 years and above in the U.S. increased from about 4% of the population in 1900 to about 12% in 2000 (Himes, 2001). This proportion is expected to increase by another five percent toward the end of this decade. Life expectancy in the United

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States has increased for almost all social groups (Weinstein and Pillai, 2001). As people age, they lose a spouse or partner, friends and close relatives. Those who survive often lack the support network. Studies have shown that after the death of a spouse, a high proportion of bereaved spouses experience high mortality and morbidity risks (Bonanno & Kaltman, 1999; Hall & Irwin, 2001; Caserta, Lund, & Obray, 2004

Older adults experience several types of losses such as job, career, health and standard of living. With reductions in income, quality of living arrangements is likely to decline along with increases in concerns for physical and emotional security. The fear of crime is pervasive among older adults. Fear engenders a growing sense of powerlessness especially for those who are not in an intimate relationship. The feeling of loneliness is likely to increase with age among growing proportion of older adults living alone and uninvolved in an intimate relationship (Tijhuis, et al, 1999). Lack of intimate relationships is one of the most important determinants of feelings of loneliness (Tiikkainen, Heikkinen and Leskinen, 2004). The suicide prevalence rate among older adults is the highest among all groups in the United States (Alston, Rankin, & Harris, 1995) Even among individuals who are financially and physically secure, emotional needs often remain unmet, resulting in a high risk of loneliness and decreased life satisfaction (Bulcroft & O'Connor, 1986). The joint effects of loneliness and fear of crime are likely to decrease the level of well-being among the elderly.

Minority elderly are particularly vulnerable to loneliness. A long history of oppression of minority populations such as African Americans has contributed to a decline in the mental and physical health status among minority elderly (Mills & Edwards, 2002; Schiele, 2005; Gabbidon & Peterson, 2006). African American elderly are far more likely to be alone than the rest of the elderly. Approximately 35% of African American elderly aged 65-74 live alone, compared to 22% of the white elderly in 2009 (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2007). Nearly 48% of African American women and 19% of men are widowed. Among African Americans over age 65, 54% of men and 25% of women are married, compared to 80% and 40% among whites (AARP, 1990). Systematic declines in well-being experienced by any group are a matter of concern both from a social justice and human rights perspective.

Barriers to communication and seeking intimate relationships are particularly acute among nursing home elderly (Hicks, 2000). Nearly 8% of the elderly aged 75 and older lived in nursing homes in 2008. The number of people living in nursing homes is likely to exceed 71 million by 2030 (Administration on Aging, n.d.). There are, however, significant race differences in the percentages of unmarried elderly populations.

Very few studies have investigated the nature of intimate relationships among African American elderly. Orbe (1997) puts forward the 'muted group theory' to suggest that needs of minority groups such as African Americans are more likely to be overlooked than the needs of dominant groups. He strongly encourages all forms of communication and publicity programs necessary to highlight the needs of the marginalized. Earlier studies on romantic relationships have focused on primarily Caucasian older adults (Barusch, 2008, de Beauvoir, 1995), and they found that definitions of love vary significantly across categories of gender. However, Barusch (2008) states, "Love is in part, an idea shaped by the culture and time in which it is expressed… Love changes over the course of history and of individual lives it evolves in surprising ways" (p. 12). She further states, "The experiences associated with romance may be mediated by human biochemistry and physiology. But what we make of those experiences—how we interpret and shape them—is determined by the culture and era in which we live" (p. 14).

Previous research on older adults shows that as people age they are able to manage their relationships better than during their younger years, as they pay more attention to cognitive and emotional changes necessary for maintaining the quality of their intimate relationships. A large proportion of the research on intimacy among the elderly is among the majority white population in the United States. Studies on love and intimacy among African Americans are few and far between. One objective of this study is to address the meanings and perceptions of love among African American older adults. Another is to comprehend the various approaches African American elderly suggest to improve opportunities for intimate relationships among themselves. The research question that guides this paper is: What are the views of love among older African Americans? In general this study attempts to generate information necessary to frame the lack of attention to the needs of the African American elderly for intimate relationships as a human rights issue.

Methodology
Study Procedure
The first author collected in-depth interview data on 12 African American older adult participants. The study protocol was approved by the internal review board of a West Coast University in the U.S. A snowball purposive sampling method was utilized to recruit participants for this study. We asked participants and service providers from an Adult Day Health Center to refer their friends for our study. The Adult Day Health Center was located in a predominantly African American and low-income suburb. Four participants were recruited from the Adult Day Health Center. Inclusion criteria for selection into the sample are as follows: the selected person must be seventy years or older, born in the U.S., and mentally and physically capable of participating in a one-hour interview.

Most of the members in the snowball sample were interviewed in the Adult Day Health Center and the rest in their homes. Semi-structured interviews were conducted either at the Adult Day Health Center or at a campus depending on the preference of the participant. The researcher collected data until saturation was reached and additional cases revealed no new information. All interviews retained confidentiality, and client names or other identifying information were secured throughout the project.

All interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed and hand-coded. The transcription from each interview was reread with marginal and reflective comments from the first author, and these comments were jotted in the left margin along with the location of the comment on the audiotape from each participant. Key phrases and or words within the transcript were occasionally circled or underlined with different color markers. Marginal comments included noted areas of similarity with other respondents. Matrices were then constructed to visually display the participant's responses and the themes. In addition, participant's responses to a particular set of questions and my general impressions of the interview were also reduced and placed within the matrix. Examples of interview questions include: a) What is love? b) How did you learn to love? C) To what extent do you believe that race or culture influenced your views about love?

During the process of visually creating a grid of participant responses, interviews were re-read to ensure key points and depth were not lost during the process of reducing the data to fit the matrix. In sum, participant interviews were transcribed from audiotapes with the characteristics associated with the meaning of love. Gender differences and influence of racism was given particular attention. Who (gender, class) perceived what (Hymes, 1972) was

transferred from narrative form into matrices to examine possible relationships. Data was grouped into themes and sub-themes and analyzed for insight by two researchers.

Demographics
In this sample of fifteen older adults, seven were males and eight were females. Four of the participants were currently married, three were single (widowed), two were divorced, and one was never married. Participants reported income ranging from very low-income to upper middle-class. Ninety percent of the sample was church goers. Age ranged from 70-100 years.

Measurement
Open-ended questions were as follows:
1) What is love? (i.e., is it a feeling, a decision, an impulse?)
2) Have you ever been "in love"? Describe this experience. When were you in love? Did this change: sleeping patterns? Appetite? Obsessive thoughts about the person you were in love with? An "emotional roller coaster"?
3) How did you learn to love? How has your definition of love changed over the course of your life? What is your advice to younger generations?
4) Is there a relationship between love and sex? Tell me about this relationship.
5) To what extent do you believe that race or culture influenced your views about love? Do you believe that historical racism influenced the way you love?

Results
Six main themes and several subthemes were derived from a comprehensive review of the qualitative research data. These themes and subthemes are:

Attraction	*Love Is (Defining Love)*
• *Compatibility* • *Non-verbal*	• *No Public Display of Affection (PDA)* • *Spiritual* • *Valuing Each Other*
Love over 70	*Societal Influences on Love*
• *Changing Views* • *Recognizing Past Mistakes* • *Failing Health*	• *Marriage* • *Negative Undertones of Racial Influence*
Sustaining Love	*Advice (On Love)*
• *Caring* • *Gender Differences on Sex and Love* • *Companionship*	• *Respect* • *Value of a Person* • *Take Your Time*

Attraction

Attraction among African American older adults was described as follows:

Compatibility

"It [attraction] starts with you wanting to be in that person's company; when you have an overwhelming desire to be with that particular person rather than someone else. That's when your love first starts."

<div align="right">

-Mr. T. 83

</div>

"Well, you know, that's, that's…I don't think that's love…you know…Love at first sight, I've never been into that. Uh...physical attraction…a way a person act, carry themselves, that draws me to them. I don't like loud, or lazy…I like conservative types, you know… that's about it."

<div align="right">

-Mr. L. 85

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Non-verbal Attraction

"Oh, he was caring, and he was attentive and he would, and we would go to the movie and go out and just so compassionate and, and…all the things that ladies love, that's what he showed me."

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-Ms. J. 70

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Love over 70

African American older adults indicated that love changed from the romantic excitement of love to the helping companionship of love as they got older. A large proportion of African Americans in later life stated that they did not want to get married. They desired an intimate relationship as with a boyfriend or a girlfriend. Among single widowed African American older adults the reasons cited for separate living was a fear of caregiving and sharing their financial resources with a new partner. A large number of participants were involved in the church community and with extended family of children, grandchildren and friends. Below are some sub-themes.

Changing Views

"Okay. My definition of love, as a youngster, young person, you look at love as this feeling about a person, but, as you get older, you begin to look at the value of a person. And from there, you get to esteem the individual…Of course, when you're older, you're looking at life differently. What are our values in life now in comparison to when we were young. What will we be doing in life now, in comparison to when we were young."

<div align="right">

-Ms. L. 75

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Recognizing Past Mistakes

"Well, now I uh, can be with someone and care about what they want. I have to get to know them and spend time."

-Mr. T. 83

"Well now, I've got to the point where I'm growing…I'm growing older, and, and I miss out on lots of things and she takes up the slack for me. She looks out for me in a protective type of thing. She makes sure I take my medication on time, and she sees that I eat properly, you know what I mean, and make…she doesn't make as many mistakes as I had made in the past, that type of stuff."

-Mr. L. 85

Failing Health

Failing health was mentioned as a reason for not pursuing intimate love relationship. Two female participants in poor health relied on vicarious means like watching romantic shows and movies as a way of coping with being alone.

Sustaining Love

Companionship

"Uh, I don't know, it's just that we were, very compatible. We liked the same things and out of that association we became closer and closer."

-Mr. T. 83

"You just…when I find myself longing for their companionship, then I know [I'm in love]. When I put their feelings above everything…If you love someone, then you don't crave your freedom, but if you don't love somebody, then you, you tend to give in to your desires. And you know there's a difference between desire and love…Lust plays a big part into it."

-Mr. T. 83

Caring

"If I love a person, I'm going to give them the freedom to be themselves. And I would expect vice versa. In other words, I'm not going to try to make a person what they are not. And try to bind them to become what I want them to be. That's not love, you've got to give them the freedom to be who they are." (on the relationship between love and freedom)

-Ms. L. 75

"No. If you love a person…you're willing to sacrifice and even though, you know, you don't have everything, you're just willing to sacrifice and make do with whatever you have." (on the connection with love and money)

-Mrs. L. 84

"I don't know how you could meet somebody, or be with them for weeks and say you in love. Because to me love has to be cared for and grown, just like a plant…a seed has to be planted. Um, you may want to continue to see someone, or be around them all the time, but it's always been for me that love had to be cultivated, not just I meet you..."

-Ms. E. 76

Gender Differences in Thoughts on Sex and Love

Women

"Some people can want sex but it's not because they are in love, we know, because we see that all the time. And then others would say no, because sex without love to me is abusive. So I wouldn't want it, that's taking advantage of the person. But if a guy loves a woman, he's not going to want to abuse her, to take advantage of her, or vice versa sometimes women can be as bad. But I think, to keep you in the right perspective, sex follows love…When people begin to get older, there are times when the male may become impotent. I don't think that would destroy the love."

-Ms. L. 75

"Sex is one form (of love), but intimacy and respect is in all…if you stop having respect for each other, ain't no need to have anything else, because it's not gonna get it. And so, when you stop having respect, you won't feel so loved, but you must love yourself."

-Ms. K. 71

Men

(On if there's a relationship between love and sex) "Yeah, well, if, if you care for somebody, or love somebody there has to be the love part in it, or it's not happening, as far as I'm concerned."

-Mr. B. 82

"Well, now (that I'm older) I uh, can be with someone and care about what they want...[but] I just don't think that I could, uh fulfill all the requirements of the marriage bed." (so I wouldn't marry at my age, even if I was in love)

-Mr. T. 83

Love Is… (Defining Love)

Older African Americans defined love as respect, trust, giving to and helping your partner. Love is defined as a feeling, necessary to sustain the love relationship and once the feeling vanish, so does the love. Although love was described as being uncontrollable, spirituality became an important underlying sub-theme in defining love.

No PDA (Public Display of Affection)

"Yeah, and, uh, uh, uh…Another way I can describe love…I want to spend lots of time with them, regardless, you know, whatever…watching movies, or parties, or whatever, I enjoy them. That kind a thing. As I grow older, those kind a things are past now. I mean, I still have to love, but kissing, holding hands, that kind a thing, I'm past that. It's embarrassing."

<div align="right">

-Mr. L. 85

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Spiritual

"Love is spiritual, it's a feeling, not an object that you can see, it's a feeling that you have, that's what love is."

<div align="right">

-Mr. T. 83

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(What I would look for now in love) "A man who is into the Lord. Go to church…and to believe in those things that I believe in, um, I still deal with the respect and honor…"

<div align="right">

-Ms. E. 76

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Valuing Each Other

"Right. I think love is, more than a feeling, although it is a feeling. I think it's seeing a person, and seeing the value of that person. And then, to me, love is what ability would I have, or what inclination would I have to meet that person's needs. To do the best I could, to make them complete, I think that would be love. Love is giving, it's also receiving, but I think it's, what could I do to this person to make their life more complete or enjoyable. I think feelings go with it, but I think it's not only feelings, but the value of the person. I mean what is the worth of the individual."

<div align="right">

-Ms. L. 75

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"Love says, I don't have to worry about him, and he doesn't have to worry about me, because if I'm going to be with him, don't worry about it, I am with you all the time. You can trust me, because I trust you. Trust gotta be there. Trust is the most important difference."

<div align="right">

-Ms. L. 70

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"No, no, love isn't something you can control. When you love, you just love, I mean, you're hoping that the other person love you too. Because, see, if I could've just did that with my husband, I would've just cut that off. I couldn't, I was too much in love.

<div align="right">

-Ms. J. 70

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"I have a friend, and she gave me this card, it said…to my friend, whom I know everything about, but yet love. In other words, we have shared. She knows me, I

don't have to put on any airs with her. You know, all of this that we're doing today about love, that has to come later in your life to really be meaningful."

-Ms. K. 71

Societal Influences on Love
Older African Americans were influenced by their parents' and societal views on love. Two sub-themes that emerged from the data include the value of marriage in their parents' generation, the absence of PDA (public displays of affection). Although most participants did not believe historical racism had directly influenced their views on love, they preferred to have same-race relationships resulting in intimacy and love.

Marriage

"Marriage is valued too low now, I think. There isn't that high esteem for marriage that I think God intended. People have gone so far from it, so it's quite different now. People get married and divorced at will now, and it's just so common."

-Ms. L. 75

Negative Undertones of Racial Influence

"No. I didn't let it [race] do that [influence my views about love]. I wanted to get somebody close to my complexion, brown skin, light brown-skin…."

-Mr. B. 82

"I had to learn how to love people. 'Cuz my mom worked every day. Uh, worked for white people every day. And that was during the days that uh, blacks worked for white people and uh, you had to show your love for the white people by cooking and doing stuff for them…but, uh, those were the days when we had to do some of the work even because our parents worked, my parents worked for them. They were maids…yeah…"

-Ms. S. 70+

"…Different cultures have heard about the African American love life…very negative. And I know that it [racism] had a lot of influence on it, because they put the woman, black…African American woman as always controlling, incapable of loving, bashing their husband, always fussing and gossiping and not knowing how to give him love, or how to treat him. That is a myth. That is strictly a myth…Racism could have put a few uh, pounds on my shoulders, weights on my shoulders, because I wasn't raised to be prejudice, and some things happened to my mom and dad. My mom being very fair complexed and my dad was uh, more browner, and when we lived in the South, um, they thought that when the lighter skin, they thought they were white. They didn't care, if you had some whiteness to your skin, you were considered white…Until my mother had to say something, get your hands off my husband and leave him alone, I'm not white. And I think that's horrible, so it could have because when I…I was married, and my husband

laughed about it because white men were attracted to me, but I was always, so I'm sure it had something to do with it, racism, because I was always telling them off. You know, if they tried to...right away, I had that big 'ole M sign up, I'm married, don't be saying anything to me, and um, I had this thing that they wanted to go with blacks just for that reason, for sex only, and so yes [historical racism did influence my views on love]...in other places, Mississippi, the African American man, in the thirties and on up, if he look at a white woman, he got killed or hung, and you know when I was in school. I'm a graduate of 1958...Emmett Till, I'll never forget it, in 1955 he was killed because they said he whistled at a white woman, so yes, it [racism] has a lot of influence."

<div align="right">

-Ms. K. 71

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"No. Not for me...um, I don't think it [racism] had anything to do with it [how I loved people]. I think it all started out with my parents and how I was brought up, and what I see today, and what I seen in this last generation, you know drugs and prostitution has always been around. Men who beat up on women...I think there's more trafficking of young people than before, and these young people out here on the streets, thinking that a pimp can make them happy...but racism uh, has never influenced me about how I feel about love, it really hasn't."

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-Ms. E. 76

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Advice (On Love)

'Advice on love' incorporated the sub-themes such as respect, taking your time to get to know the other person, the idea of valuing yourself and the other person. At older ages, the concept of love should accommodate the possibility that older African Americans may have health challenges and that one has to reconcile with these challenges by learning how to value the whole person.

Respect

"...treat her with respect, give her the things she's supposed to have and ask for respect in return..."

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-Mr. L. 85

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"Like we said, you have to love yourself first. You have to respect yourself first and demand that other people respect you. You can't demand love, if you can't demand respect.

<div align="right">

-Ms. L. 70

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Value of a Person

"Take a good look at what love really is. Love is more than a feeling, it is a...valuing, seeing, looking at the value of a person, and then how do you esteem that person."

<div align="right">

-Ms L. 75

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Take Your Time

"Take your time. Take your time. Yeah."

<div align="right">

-Ms. S. 70+

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Older African American adults described romantic love in terms of compatibility and companionship. Love during late years in life was defined as a relationship between two people desiring to spend time in each other's company characterized by traits such as mutual help, good communication and mutual respect. These traits were seen as necessary for sustaining an intimate relationship. This perception of romantic love does not fit into the definitions of romantic love portrayed by the younger generation and the media. Sex is viewed to be a necessary part of the relationship, and important for a healthy relationship. However, older African Americans with health problems value their partner's company more than their ability to satisfy sexual needs within a relationship. This is due to the fact that in older years they understand that sex withheld is not due to disrespect, or limited desire, but due to health limitations.

There were few gender differences in terms of the need for sex among older African Americans. Women recognized the importance of maintaining sexual health in older years. African American men were more likely to view sexual relations as being more important to the health of the relationship compared to African American women. Older African American men report having made past mistakes within intimate relationship(s) and now recognize the need to care for and value the other person. PDA (Public Display of Affection) was not seen as vital to the health of the relationship and romantic love was defined as caring for and valuing the other person. The importance of valuing the other person is a concept that many participants acknowledged was not taken seriously during younger years, but is now perceived as a necessity to maintain healthy a relationship. Many participants grew serious about spirituality in older years and cited the spiritual basis of their romantic interest as a strong indicator of their ability to form a romantic relationship with an individual.

Participants acknowledged that their parents had a part in how they learned to love, and most participants voiced the view that society today does not place the same importance and respect on the institution of marriage as their parents' generation had. Participants acknowledged growing up in a time of societal racial oppression and voiced that they had to consciously choose not to let society influence how they chose to love others. Some participants voiced a direct association between beliefs they internalized growing up and the decisions they made with regard to intimate involvement. One participant in particular stated that white men were attracted to her, but she could not allow herself to date white men. This was because she could not move past her belief that white men only liked the black woman in order to take advantage and have sex with her. This participant stated that this concept was taught to her as a result of being raised in the South, where black men were punished for looking "inappropriately" at white women while white men were free to take advantage of the black women with no negative consequences for themselves. This participant added that her mother was a very fair-skinned African American woman who often had to declare her blackness, so her husband would not be accused of being "inappropriate" with a white woman. This and other situations made relationships with white men taboo for this participant. In speaking about the effects of racism in their life, one participant stated that although she does not believe that historical racism affected how she loved people, she drew a direct correlation between historical racism as a love-shaping factor in her generation,

and drugs and prostitution as a love-shaping factor in today's generation of young people. In her opinion, societal views on love play a much bigger role in today's society than it did in her generation. This may be partially due to the influence of the media on the minds of young people today.

Most participants echoed a single word in regards to imparting advice on to the younger generation: respect. Older African Americans reiterated that respect is the cornerstone of the relationship, and once respect is lost, the relationship cannot stand strong.

Discussion

The present study investigated the perception of love in the older African American community. Several participants from the Adult Day Health Center declined to interview citing that romantic love was not a topic they wanted to speak about. Those participants who engaged in the interview process showed their uncertainty on the topic through comments like, "I don't know too much about love." Love is a topic that everyone has an opinion about, but no one claims expert status on. Although there were many similarities on the concept of love among older African Americans the definitions were broad, fluid and changeable depending on the individual's unique life experience (Murthy, Rotzien, & Vacha-Haase, 1996). The common definition among older African Americans was affection based on admiration, benevolence, or common-interests. The concept of love among older African Americans focused on persons' personality and their ability to value the person as being more important than their physical attractiveness or desirability. According to Sternberg (1997), "companionate love derives from a combination of the intimacy and decision/commitment components of love." This definition of companionate love most closely defines older African American adults' perceptions of love.

Lee (1988) outlines six love styles. Older African Americans' love fits into three of the six love styles: Friendship love (Storge), Logical love (Pragma), and Selfless love (Agape). In older years, their ability to care deeply for an individual and their willingness to meet their needs supersedes other considerations. The remaining three love-styles; romantic love, game-playing love, and possessive or excited love, were not prominent themes in the perceptions of older African American love. Game-playing love and possessive love themes were completely absent in the participants' portrayal of romantic love with some desire for romantic love. This desire for romantic love among older African Americans based strictly on physical attraction to the other person was very subtle, with the three other themes taking strong precedence when expressing love. Our findings are similar to Barusch (2008) in that several of our respondents also found admiration for specific traits and values in their partner attractive (p. 17). They emphasized knowledge or understanding of the person as an important component of love.

There is a great amount of commonality between the genders in terms of what they seem to agree on in terms of romantic love in later life. A count of all the concepts employed by both men and women yielded similar frequencies. The most common terms used by both genders appeared as variations of the concepts know, want, care, respect, and grow. Women used far more terms to describe love relationship than men though at lower frequencies not exceeding two. Our findings concur with earlier research that late life may reduce gender difference in love. Several gerontologists show that freedoms of later life can cause blurring of traditional gender divisions with respect to the meaning of love. We find that men in their 70s are more concerned with the emotional quality of their romantic relationships than they were in their 20s.

The older African Americans in our study belong to a generation that was taught to question "What does it mean to me to be African American?" The ways that they resolved such questions have shaped their racial identity and have influenced many important life outcomes, including their experience with romantic love (Maywalt Scottham, Cooke, Sellers, & Ford, 2009). Most participants believe that the present-day South still has many restrictions on the role of African Americans in society. This expected role directly influences identity and the individual's willingness to step outside the box in their expression of romantic love. Individual action and social structure therefore has a big impact on how older African Americans' have viewed their role in society.

A couple of participants voiced reservations in engaging in inter-racial relations, and a participant spoke of African Americans as having to know their place in society and cited the Emmett Till case of 1955, in which a 14-year-old boy was brutally killed in Mississippi for allegedly whistling at a white woman. This case had a profound impact on the mind of this participant and other African Americans in the country and was a catalyst for the Civil Rights Movement. The fact that 1955 was not that long ago must have some impact on participants stating that although their parents did not teach them to be prejudiced they wanted someone close to their complexion because the social environment taught them the lesson. This same participant added that her mother was a very fair-skinned African American woman who often had to declare her blackness so her husband would not be accused of being "inappropriate" with a white woman. This and other situations made relationships with white men taboo in this participants' mind.

Participants cited a direct association between their parents' lessons on love and the way in which they ultimately showed love and who they chose to love. Thus parents' attitude toward love may influence their child's adult relational patterns and views of love (Inman-Amos, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 1994).

We found that older African American cited reasons to be in a relationship, but did not want to be in a marriage. Failing health, financial reasons and a desire for freedom from caregiving were deterrents for marriage. Earlier studies show that older adults are selective in their choice of partners (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999) and choose those with whom they are compatible.

This study breaks age old assumptions that love in later life is sustained in the same way as it happens for young adults. Older African Americans still desire love, but they view romantic love as originating and being sustained when couples are compatible in their values, are caring, respectful and focused on companionship. These themes of companionship, caring, compatibility, and respect appeared to be the most important themes throughout this study. Older African American adults' have learned the importance of valuing their partner and living out the idea of "what I can give my partner" versus "what they can do for me".

Most participants expressed that they still want to experience romantic love. In speaking about success in life one participant stated, "I could have been more successful if things had worked out alright, and had a good companion, I would have been happy" (Mr. B.), referring to his desire to have found the right person and to grow old with her. Although he had the love of family and friends, at age 83 he believed that having a romantic, caring relationship in later life would have been the capstone of a 100% successful life. The study finds that even for those individuals whose financial and physical needs are met by children and friends, there may still be an unmet emotional need, resulting in a higher risk of loneliness and decreased life satisfaction (Bulcroft & O'Connor, 1986).

Health issues impede the formation of intimate relationships due to media messages of sexual performance taking precedence over spiritual views. Although sex was viewed as an important part of the relationship and necessary for a healthy relationship, older African Americans' did not view sex as the cornerstone of the relationship. Media messages may pressure some older adults into placing a higher value on sex in older years, and may ultimately have a negative effect on the self-worth and well-being of older adults who long for a relationship but cannot consistently fulfill sexual needs. One participant stated that even if he fell in love today, at age 83, he would not marry the person because he could not "meet the requirements of the marriage bed." Our findings point to existing literature that cultural oppression may be a primary source of stress for older African Americans as they may have internalized the values of majority population and this has led to cultural estrangement, a weakened Black collectivism and spiritual alienation (Schiele, 2005, p. 821).

Implications

This study has implications for social interventionists who care and work for promoting well-being among older African Americans. Our findings allude to the consideration of sexual ethical issues for improving the well-being among African American elderly. Elderly African American men and women share similar ideals with respect to romantic love. Their concerns for growing together, and knowing the partner in her or his own terms call for acquiring skills and capacities necessary to negotiate, communicate and enter into consensual relationships. Perceived opportunities for skill building among African Americans however remain diminished by experiences of racism. Framing the aspirations as well the constraints faced by African Americans in experiencing love in their later life as sexual ethical issues provide social planners with a commanding strategy to advocate for African American elderly.

Social researchers should investigate the effect of media messages regarding sexual health and sexuality among older African Americans. The popular media may increase isolation among few older Americans who may retreat socially rather than pursue what they believe is normative sexual behaviors for their age. Potential withdrawal from romantic relationships could negatively affect their emotional and mental well-being. Social policy and education could then be geared towards counteracting the negative effects of media images of older African Americans and love.

Societal implications are huge if more older African Americans gain comfort in speaking out about their desire and need for romantic love. These conversations will help inform the younger generations to whole-heartedly accept prevalence of intimate behaviors among older African Americans in love. With a change in attitude and social environment supportive of development of intimacy, African American elderly may experience greater level of well-being in older years. By discovering the voice of older African Americans on romantic love, social planners could work toward creating programs and activities that meet the changing needs of our older population.

Intimacy was understood as a state of emotional closeness characterized by mutual respect and self-worth. The results of our study suggests that among older African Americans the need for intimacy is closely related to desire for companionship. Membership in social groups offers older African Americans social choices with respect to developing and nurturing mutual attraction that may lead to companionship. It is well known that African Americans belong to church groups much more often than other social groups. Church settings therefore offer an

important site to help African American elderly with companionship. Improvements in accessibility to memberships in informal social groups are likely to improve companionship. Studies have found that church members who are close promote healthy behaviors much more effectively than formal church-based health promotion programs (Campbell, James, Hudson, Carr, and Jackson, 2004; Krause, Shaw and Laing, 2011). Peers and companions are valuable resources in improving well-being among African American elderly. Social interventionists and planners workers are well equipped to support formation of companionships. Knowledge of African American culture and history of racism, and respect for self-determination are essential for supporting friendship among social group members (Carter, 1984).

Our findings indicating the relevance and importance of love among elderly African Americans might evoke tendencies of overgeneralization. It is plausible that the similar descriptive statement of love as obtained in this study could be made by elderly from various other ethnic groups and therefore implications of our findings may not only be culture specific but more general and pan-human. We caution against overgeneralization and assert that the use of qualitative methods of research assumes that the object of investigation is culture specific. The motivations of our research are more guided by the need to understand how people assign meaning to an objective world in which their valued experiences are situated within a historical and social context. A universal issue that is important for the aging population regardless of their ethnic and cultural background is that love relationships are embedded in a social network. The social network of older adult couples would NOT be formed if societal norms prohibit them in forming relationships over time. For example gay/lesbian/transgender and people with disabilities have been historically marginalized and ostracized by the larger hetero-normative society in forming intimate relationships and therefore reach old age with lower density of intimate relationships compared to others.

Limitations

One of the limitations of our study was a small sample size that was homogenous in terms of socio-economic status of the group. This study needs to be replicated with a larger sample size of African American older adults from different neighborhoods, different states, and involving inter-racial African American couples in intimate relationships.

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