Black Singles: Gender Differences in Mate Preferences and Heterosexual Attitudes*

HALFORD H. FAIRCHILD

The study of Black heterosexual relationships is becoming an increasingly popular subject of investigation (Akbar, 1981; Fairchild, 1982; Houston, 1981; Jackson, 1975; Rodgers-Rose, 1980; Turner and Turner, 1974). The major portion of this commentary and research has been directed toward the quality of Black male/female relationships.

In general, Black heterosexual relationships have been seen to be beset by a plethora of problems and conflicts (cf. Benjamin, 1983; Jewell, 1983). For instance, Houston (1981) discovered "a profound disunity" between Black males' and females' attitudes and values concerning heterosexual relations. In contrast, white males and white females exhibited a fair degree of correspondence in their attitudes and values (Houston, 1981). Similarly, Turner and Turner (1974) reported that many Black college students endorsed derogatory evaluations of other Blacks (more than whites endorsed such statements made of other whites).

Current researchers are examining the extent to which Black men and Black women either facilitate or hinder salient relationships. Cazenave (1983), for example, studied Black males' perceptions of incongruity in Black heterosexual relationships. This study indicated that Black men perceive "inability to communicate" as the major problem. In a similar vein, McAdoo (1983) reported that single mothers were more likely to choose "ability to communicate" as the most desirable quality in a mate. Furthermore, these women were likely to indicate that poor communication was second only to "financial problems" as being the culprit in their most recent marriage or relationship (McAdoo, 1983).

Finally, a series of studies have documented the extent to which Black men and women readily asssent to a wide range of unflattering stereotypes such as "Black men are no good," "Black men are irresponsible," and "Black women are patriarchal" (Benjamin 1983; Houston 1981; Turner and Turner 1974). While such findings are not uniformly replicated (see Jackson 1973; Smith and Millham 1979), they do emphasize the need to study gender differences in the formation of Black heterosexual relationships.

The present study was designed to examine questions raised by each of these areas of investigation. Specifically, this study addresses gender differences in values about the formation of Black heterosexual relationships, plus gender differences in a variety of heterosexual attitudes. This study is significant for several reasons. First, it examines priorities within the mate selection process. Priorities in selecting a mate yield information about the values that individuals emphasize in the formation of heterosexual

---

*This article was developed and prepared in association with Kamau Kemayo, Marie La Fargue, Rosa Johnson, Everett Evans, Van Alexander, Kim Law, Terri Johnson, Michael-Ann Brown, Pamela Dosu, and Heinrich Arnivalah. The author also thanks the following individuals for their assistance in data collection and data processing: Scarlett Potts, Deirdre Clark, Darlene Daniel, Faisal Robe and Clydell Hill.

HALFORD H. FAIRCHILD is an Assistant Professor of Psychology and a faculty Research Associate with the Center for Afro-American Studies at the University of California at Los Angeles. He received the doctorate in Social Psychology from the University of Michigan.
relationships. Such data are also amenable to questions of gender differences among Black Americans. Second, unlike many of the previous investigations on Black perceptions, the present study uses both male and female subjects, and examines gender role prescriptions and stereotypes relevant to both genders. Finally, the present study focuses upon mate selection and heterosexual attitudes because a substantial body of literature has emphasized these topics as being critical to interpersonal relations.

Method

SUBJECTS

The subjects were 71 Black males and 74 Black females (all university students) who ranged in age from 17 to 41 with a mean of 21.6 (SD = 3.92). The majority (92.7%) of the sample were U.S. citizens. The major portion of this sample (85.6%) were now, or had been, in a serious heterosexual relationship, although none were currently married. Each subject had an average of two serious relationships in the past 3 years, with a mean duration of 16.8 months.

PROCEDURE

Subjects were purposively recruited to yield a 50 percent male, 50 percent female sample. Subjects completed a three-part questionnaire (Preferences in a Mate; Heterosexual Attitudes; and Personal Background) within a one hour sitting. Questionnaires were distributed by 15 experimenters (6 male and 9 female), all of whom were students enrolled in a graduate seminar in research methods. Each experimenter sought half of his or her questionnaires from males, and half from females. Subjects were individually surveyed, and were provided with a full debriefing subsequent to the completion of the survey.

INSTRUMENTATION

Preferences in a Mate. This scale was designed to assess the degree of importance of 15 independent preferences in a mate. This scale was worded so as to eliminate any reference to gender differences, thereby minimizing explicit comparison. Subjects were required to rate each of the 15 qualities according to how important it was as a quality in their mate. Subjects rated each quality from 1 (not at all important) to 5 (highest importance). The 15 preferences were drawn from the literature within this area (social poise, sexual performance, physical attractiveness, financial status, affectionate, religious orientation, thrifty, responsible, professional status, cleanliness/neatness, common sense, independence, intelligence, spirituality, fidelity/faithfulness).

Heterosexual Attitudes. Fifty items were included in this scale. Subjects were required to rate each item from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). Some items were structured so as to make an explicit comparison between men and women (e.g., "A husband should not make major financial decisions without consulting his wife"). Included within this item type were statements specific to Black men and women (e.g., "Most Black women don't respect Black men"). Other items were worded so as to pertain to only one gender (e.g., "Black women are too aggressive"); "Raising the children should be the role of the man"). The 50 items sampled the 15 content areas listed in Preferences in a Mate.

Personal Background. This scale assessed basic background data such as age, gender, religious affiliation, relationship history, citizenship, and so forth.

Results

Preferences in a Mate

For each of the 15 preferences, t-tests were computed using gender of subject as the independent factor: Black men and Black women differed significantly in their ratings of importance for six of the fifteen mate preferences. Females had higher mean scores on five of these six items (standard deviations are in parentheses): financial status (3.86 (1.03), vs. 2.16 (1.03), t (140) = 5.85, p < .001), independence (4.37 (1.69), vs. 3.86 (1.03), t (141) = 3.82, p < .001), fidelity/faithfulness (4.76 (0.49), vs. 4.35 (0.88), t (140) = 3.42, p < .001), responsible (4.63 (0.51), vs. 4.33 (0.74), t (141) = 2.85, p < .05), and professional status (3.32 (0.97), vs. 2.95 (1.32), t (141) = 2.00, p < .05). Males, on the other hand, had a higher mean score for physical attractiveness (3.73 (0.90) for males vs. 3.22 (0.88) for females. t (142) = -3.45, p < .001. These differences notwithstanding, males and females did not differ on nine of the fifteen items (social poise, sexual performance, affectionate, religious orientation, thrifty, cleanliness/neatness, common sense, intelligence, and spirituality). Moreover, males and females tended to agree on those items of most or least importance. The three most important qualities for the male subsample were: cleanliness/neatness (1st), fidelity/faithfulness (2nd), and responsible (3rd); and the three least important were: thrifty (13th), religious orientation (14th).

70 The Western Journal of Black Studies, Vol. 9, No. 2, 1985
and financial status (15th). For the females, the three most important qualities were: fidelity/faithfulness (1st), responsible (2nd), and common sense (3rd); whereas the three least important were financial status (13th), thriftly (14th), and religious orientation (15th).³

HETEROSEXUAL ATTITUDES

Significant gender differences emerged for 17 of the 50 items on heterosexual attitudes. These differences may be grouped into six classes: attitudes toward egalitarian relationships, stereotypical attitudes of Black males and females, adherence to traditional gender roles, endorsement of counter-stereotypical gender roles, sexuality, and interracial relationships.

Concerning attitudes toward egalitarian relationships, females were more likely to agree to the following items (means are given, with standard deviations in parentheses): "Men and women should share equal status in marriage" [4.46 (.78) vs. 3.97 (1.04), t(141) = 3.19, p<.01]; and "A husband should not make major financial decisions without consulting his wife" [4.51 (.78) vs. 3.81 (1.00), t(142) = 4.70, p<.001].

Regarding male/female stereotypes, males were more likely to agree to the following items: "Most Black women don't respect Black men" [2.57 (1.17) vs. 1.95 (.94), t(140) = -3.49, p<.001]; whereas females were more likely to agree to the converse of the above item: "Most Black men don't respect Black women" [2.62 (1.13) vs. 2.29 (1.11), t(140) = 1.74, p<.05].

On the topic of sexuality, men tended to endorse items that suggested their adherence to a "sexual double standard": "It's okay to have a sexual relationship on or before the first date" [2.87 (1.18) vs. 2.08 (.99), t(140) = -4.31, p<.001]; "It is natural for a man to have more than one woman" [2.50 (1.18) vs. 1.61 (.99), t(142) = -4.93, p<.001]; and "It is okay for a man to be promiscuous, but not for a woman" [1.90 (1.00) vs. 1.55 (.97), t(141) = -2.09, p<.05]. In addition, males were more likely to agree to two items reflective of an erotic orientation: "It is a man's responsibility to satisfy his partner sexually, in any way she chooses" [2.76 (1.27) vs. 2.31 (1.22), t(140) = -2.26, p<.05]; and "It's okay to have a sexual relationship on or before the first date" [2.87 (1.18) vs. 2.08 (.99), t(140) = -4.31, p<.001].

Male and female students also differed on the degree to which they endorsed traditional gender roles. Males, in particular, were more likely to agree to items reflective of conventional female roles: "The most important functions of a woman are childbearing and domestic work" [1.86 (.91) vs. 1.39 (.76), t(142) = -3.36, p<.001]; "Women should do most if not all of the cooking" [2.65 (1.14) vs. 1.86 (.88), t(141) = -4.75, p<.001]; and "Raising the children should be the role of the woman" [2.43 (0.95) vs. 2.08 (.89), t(141) = -2.26, p<.05]. Males were also more likely to agree to an item reflective of a conventional male role: "The male's first priority is to protect his woman from harm" [3.73 (1.04) vs. 3.28 (1.32), t(141) = -2.21, p<.05].

In contrast, and somewhat surprising in light of the above findings, males were more likely to endorse items indicative of support of counter-stereotypical male/female roles: "Women should pay for the date" [2.57 (.83) vs. 2.19 (.86), t(140) = -2.73, p<.05]; "Raising children should be the role of the man" [2.26 (.85) vs. 1.80 (.79), t(142) = -3.37, p<.001]; and "The woman should determine where to go on a date" [2.65 (.72) vs. 2.34 (.83), t(141) = -2.40, p<.05].

Finally, females were more bothered by interracial relationships: "It bothers me to see inter racial couples" [2.39 (1.24) vs. 2.00 (1.01), t(140) = 1.99, p<.05]. In addition, females were more concerned with the financial status of a prospective partner: "A person must have a substantial income before I would consider a serious/intimate relationship with him or her" [2.35 (1.02) vs. 2.20 (1.09) for females and males, respectively, t(141) = 1.99, p<.05].

Although males and females differed significantly in the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the above items, it should be emphasized that gender differences did not occur on 33 of the 50 items. These items included issues on women and work; interpersonal communication; birth control; aggressiveness of men and women; love as important in a relationship; and physical force as a means of communication or influence.³

In addition, males and females tended to select the same items on which they were most likely to agree or disagree. Of the 50 items, the highest mean scores (indicating agreement) for both males and females were on the same five items: "Raising the children should be the role of both the woman and the man" (ranked first by both men and women); "Men and women should share equal status in marriage (ranked second by men and third by women); "A husband should not make major financial decisions without consulting his wife" (ranked fourth by males and second by females); and "Love is the most important part of a relationship" (ranked third by
males and fifth by females). Similarly, the items most disagreed with (i.e., items with the lowest mean scores) were comparable for males and females. Both genders, for example, rated the item "It is alright for a man to hit a woman sometimes" fiftieth (with mean scores of 1.50 for males and 1.34 for females). Both males and females disagreed with "The most important functions of a woman are child bearing and domestic work" (49th for females with a mean of 1.39 and 47th for males with a mean of 1.86); and "It is okay for a male to be promiscuous, but not for a woman" (48th for females with a mean of 1.55 and 46th for males with a mean of 1.90).

Discussion

The results of the present study can be categorized into three components. First, the results indicate that Black men and Black women often differ in their mate preferences, and in a variety of heterosexual attitudes. Secondly, many of the results conform to very conventional patterns of gender-related behavior and roles. Finally, both men and women saw mutual "respect" as problematic in male/female relationships.

One of the most striking findings of the present study was the extent to which Black men and Black women differed in their perceptions of heterosexual relationships. Over one-third of the gender comparisons yielded significant differences. Why do Black men and women differ so often? Perhaps, it is related to different patterns of socialization. White men and white women are often socialized according to complementary roles (cf. Pierropinto and Simenauer 1981). However, young Black girls are encouraged to rely on their own achievements, and they are not encouraged to rely on men and marriage for future security (Harrison 1977). Because of economic necessity, the Black woman often has to assume the multiple roles of housewife, mother, head of household and wage earner. Consequently, Black men and Black women may develop divergent attitudes about heterosexual relationships based upon different gender models and expectations.

Finally, population differences are also likely to create varying gender expectations. In 1977, the ratio of Black men to Black women was 80 to 100, or four Black men for every five Black women between the ages of twenty-five and forty-four. In other words, within this age group, there were 700,000 more Black women than Black men in 1977 (U.S. Dept. of Labor, 1978). Consequently, based upon statistics alone, Black women cannot expect to become economically or psychologically dependent upon Black men. Thus, combined with other relevant findings, it is not surprising to discover attitude dissimilarity between Black men and Black women.

The present study was not designed to examine the interaction between attitude similarity and the quality of a relationship. Moreover, comparisons were not made between Black and White samples. However, given the overwhelming literature suggesting that Black relationships are beset by a plethora of problems (cf. Benjamin 1983; Fairchild 1982; Houston 1981), it seems appropriate to suggest that attitude dissimilarity may be a contributing factor to the disharmony in Black heterosexual relationships. In the present study Black men and Black women differed on a number of important issues (financial, independence, fidelity, physical attractiveness, etc.) that are certainly related to relationship problems.

Besides the gender differences, the results of the present study also demonstrate that Black men and Black women continue to see mutual respect as problematic. Black men were more likely to agree with the statement, "Most Black women don't respect Black men" and Black women were more likely to agree with the statement, "Most Black men don't respect Black women." These findings replicate previous research (Houston 1981; Turner and Turner 1974), and perhaps are consistent with Rokeach's (1960) theory of rejection. Rokeach argued that prejudice and rejection are largely a result of perceived dissimilarity in values. As the present study has demonstrated, Black men and Black women hold many divergent attitudes and perceptions. In this regard, each gender may anticipate rejection (or lack of respect) as a consequence of acknowledging that each possesses different values, habits, and life styles. This tentative conclusion obviously requires further validation evidence.

It is important to note, however, that gender similarities were also discovered in the present study. Although more differences were obtained than would be expected by chance alone, the overall rankings of the mate preference and attitude items suggest some areas of attitudinal and value convergence. Specifically, both males and females valued fidelity/faithfulness in a mate, responsibility, common sense, intelligence and independence. Similarly, both males and females endorsed egalitarian child rearing strategies and general equality in marital roles; and both males and females rejected the use of force in a relationship, and conventional roles for females as housewife and mother.

In summation, the present study was designed
to assess gender differences in values about the formation of Black heterosexual relationships, and gender differences in a variety of heterosexual attitudes. The results indicate that gender variability is common, that the variability conforms to conventional sex role patterns, and finally, that the variability may be related to mutually perceived lack of respect.

Although this study is limited by a small and non-random sample, it is significant because it examines gender variability in mate preferences and in several dimensions of heterosexual attitudes. Moreover, it is clear that while males and females differ a great deal on mate preferences and attitudes, their overall ranking of items suggest a degree of correspondence in the preferences and attitudes of Black males and females.

NOTES

1. Copies of the questionnaire are available from the author on request: Department of Psychology, UCLA, Los Angeles, CA 90024.
2. Means and standard deviations, by sex, for all 15 mate preference items are available from the author.
3. Tables of the gender differences on all 50 attitude items are available from the author.

REFERENCES