

Focus Group Discussions of Women, Sexuality, and HIV Among African American Men

Attending a Historically Black University in the Southeast

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Abstract

Background: Because black women predominantly contract HIV/AIDS from their heterosexual partners, there is a need to learn more about the sexual behavior and attitudes of black men. Our objectives were to determine the attitudes and sexual behaviors of black men and how they relate to women and HIV prevention. **Methods:** As part of an Office of Women's Health-funded peer-led HIV prevention program targeting minority women attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), we conducted 3 focus group discussions (FGDs) with black men: 2 with ages 18-24, and 1 age 25+. A student researcher developed a FGD guide and moderated the discussions. Focus groups were audiotaped, transcribed verbatim, and coded for thematic analysis. **Results:** During 3 FGDs, men freely discussed the social, family, and campus environment that influence sexual behaviors and HIV testing. Men discussed the impact the media has on black men's attitudes toward women, how peer pressure affects sexual debut and the need for positive role models to guide black youth. **Conclusion:** The need for widespread education among black men was identified, underscoring this as a priority for HBCU campuses. This information is the basis of further research to identify how best to stimulate open dialogue, provide gender and culturally sensitive outreach, and improve existing health services.

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The majority of new HIV/AIDS cases are among African American women, with it being the leading cause of death for black women aged 25-34 years. Black women are diagnosed with HIV/AIDS at a rate 23 times higher than that for white women, making up 66% of women living with HIV/AIDS in the United States. In addition, 70% of HIV/AIDS cases among black women are due to heterosexual transmission (CDC HIV/AIDS Fact Sheet).

Project Background

Addressing the barriers to safer sexual practice among young black women attending college requires that they be empowered in their relationships. As in most cultures, young black men's attitudes towards sex, females, and relationships such as associating multiple sexual partners with manhood put them and their partners at risk. We wanted to determine the needs and opportunities for developing strategies to promote equity and respect in male/female relationships. Based on four years of conducting gender-specific peer-HIV prevention education programs at a minority institution in the southeast, we conducted male peer-led focus group discussions in order to (1) base future male education components on the needs young men identify and (2) identify the cultural channels to promote responsible sex and sexuality effort to counter the "machismo" image of black men.

Our long-term goal is to develop effective, culturally appropriate and gender-specific HIV prevention programs for black women attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Because the majority of young black women are infected by their male partners, it is also imperative to understand the attitudes and sexual and risk behaviors of black men. As a

result, our specific objectives for the current focus group study were to: (1) assess the attitudes of black men toward black women and (2) learn more about what African American men believe shapes male sexual behavior.

Methods

Training

The group of North Carolina Central University (NCCU) students chosen to conduct the focus group discussions (FGDs) completed an online training course in research ethics. This training included an introduction to the history of research ethics, the specifics and importance of informed consent, and the role of institutional review boards (IRBs). Once students completed the online training, HERMES associates trained them on collecting qualitative data, and observing and facilitating focus groups. In addition, we provided students with handouts, tips and examples of focus group guides and observation notes.

The NCCU student FGD facilitator developed and modified the FGD guide to identify and explore African American males' attitudes toward women, sex, and safer sex. The student facilitator pre-tested the guide's utility and cultural appropriateness with a group of NCCU students. The facilitator made revisions based on the pre-test before conducting the three focus groups.

Recruitment

English speaking men who self-identified as heterosexual African American men and were 18 and older were recruited to participate in this study. All participants were recruited from the NCCU campus. Recruitment efforts included a "snowball approach" where we conducted outreach to men's social and sports organizations that expanded into their social networks through word of mouth. In addition, the student facilitator distributed and posted fliers across the

NCCU campus and also used facebook.com to spread word of the study. These efforts resulted in 23 participants in two FGDs with men aged 18-24 and one FGD with men aged 25 and older.

Data Collection

All focus groups were held on the NCCU campus for participant convenience. A trained African American male facilitator and note-taker were present at each FGD. The facilitator introduced the project and study objectives at the beginning of each focus group before obtaining informed consent from each participant. Participants were asked to complete informed consent forms as well as a participant profile covering demographic and sexual behavior questions. The note-taker recorded participant comments as well as any observations he made of group interaction. Each focus group was audio recorded and lasted about 60 minutes. Participants were offered light refreshments during the focus groups and given a \$20 gas card as incentive to participate.

During each FGD, the student facilitator explained the focus group procedure and why focus groups were chosen as a method for obtaining information about men's attitudes about women and sex. Participants were asked and encouraged to respond openly and honestly to questions. The facilitator explained that everyone was an expert, there were no right or wrong answers and that everything discussed would remain confidential.

Analysis

The same students who were trained to conduct the focus groups and collect data were also trained on qualitative analysis. The students were taught to transcribe the focus groups and how to conduct thematic analysis. The student facilitator transcribed each focus group discussion verbatim and then manually analyzed them, along with observer notes, by coding comments according to recurring patterns and concepts. A HERMES associate also coded the focus groups

and the results of the two independent analyses were compared and converged. Collective results were organized according to the overarching theme related to an aspect of men's attitudes toward women and sex.

Results

Participant Demographics

Three focus groups were conducted with African American men aged 18-25 (Table 1). In the first 18-24 focus group, participants were at all levels of education with the majority in their fourth year (43%). In the second 18-24 focus group, most participants were either third or fourth year students (90%). In the 25 and older group, half of the participants were students, while half were not. Forty-eight percent of participants fell in the 21-24 age range.

Overall, most focus group participants did not have a sexual partner (57%); the older participants were more likely to have a partner (Table 2). The majority of participants indicated that they used protection the last time they had any type of sex (65%). Younger men were more likely to have used protection during their last sexual encounter than older men (57%, 80%, 50%, respectively). Likewise, the majority indicated that they intended to use protection during their next sexual encounter (78%), with the younger men being more likely to use protection than the older men (86%, 90%, 50%, respectively). Lastly, 70% of participants reported having been tested for HIV with the majority of the older group (83%) and one younger group (86%) reporting testing. The other 18-24 group reported that half had been tested and half had not.

Focus Group Results

Male attitudes toward black women. When asked about their thoughts when hearing the word "woman", men from all three groups has similar responses. Participants indicated that a true woman has goals, is "not childish", "knows how to separate her wants from her needs",

knows who she is and also has her “head on straight”. Participants in all three FGDs discussed being raised by female family members and how this has greatly impacted their notion of what it means to be a woman. The word “woman” carries with it a certain respect and dignity that a female gains through responsible behavior. Being considered a “woman” is an honor. As one man put it- “not every lady out there to me is a woman”. When asked, the male participants overwhelmingly considered the female family members that raised them to be real “women”.

Male participants in all three FGDs agreed that hip hop music videos negatively portray women. In fact, the women in music videos act in ways opposite to how these men think real women should and do act. Some participants felt that music videos, unfortunately, “teach” the younger generation how to act and how to treat others. They discussed how young men and women watch videos and see how women act and how men treat them and then emulate this behavior in their own lives. In addition, participants felt that the negative influence of the media was stronger on males who do not have family or community guidance.

Some participants indicated that by acting overtly sexual and wearing sexy clothing, women bring negative attention to themselves. One man said “...every woman who dresses that way might not be a ho...but you’re wearing a ho’s uniform. So I only have that to judge you by.” A common sentiment among male participants was that women must earn male respect and if a woman does not dress or conduct herself in a way they deem respectful, then she is deserving of the disrespect and negative attention she receives from men.

Male sexual practices. Participants identified a number of factors that they feel influences the early sexual debut of young, black men: peer pressure to experiment, the media increasing interest, curiosity, and lack of parental supervision and restriction. Many participants discussed

the lack of parental supervision and guidance as being a main factor in the sexual behaviors and infection rates among black youth:

If you look at a white neighborhood and black neighborhood... the teenagers are more sexually active than the white kids would be. So, you're starting off wrong from the jump. So the white kids, they're kinda family oriented and they're taught certain things from the beginning and a lot of them, not all of them, but a lot of them are raised in two family homes, like a mother and a father, but a lot of us aren't. So, it's like, when your mom's out there working or your pops out there working and you're there by yourself, your subjected to the community and whatever's there, boom, that's what you do. So, it's like we already started off a step behind so yeah, if we're having AIDS in our community because that's what's going around and we're not taught certain things, being brought up like they are.

Black children are able to see those types of things at an earlier age than most white children. And if a white child is able to view those, I feel like there's some teaching or some parenting going along to let them know this is not how it is. I'm thinking mainly videos. This is just for show, this isn't how it is, you don't do that. Whereas in the black household, the child sees the video and there's nothing behind it to let them know that this is fictitious, this isn't how it's supposed to be.

Many of the older men spoke of an unmet need for guidance and role models to help direct youth and cultivate interest in things other than sex and “chasing women”:

What you gotta try to do is get them to focus on something else other than sex. The reason I say that is the people I've been involved with who weren't out there chasing like I was, were people who were extremely focused on something else- whether it be athletics, academics, careers or whatever. ...so if I would have had somebody who tried to help me direct my focus to somewhere else and let me understand where my focus really needed to be, then I wouldn't have put so much emphasis into that.

Participants stated that having sex with a large number of women was a tool for building self-esteem- they felt it was an accomplishment and something to be proud of. This builds sexual reputation and serves as a form of power for men. One man stated that having multiple partners

“makes men feel important and in complete control.” However, this desire to have sex with many women was attributed to sexual development; as men age, their priorities change. As a result, the older participants considered this a phase that men go through and they were more interested in relationships and monogamy than their younger counterparts.

Participants in all three FGDs believed that it is a stereotype that black men cheat on their partners. They felt that it is no more prevalent among black men than any other group. The younger men did feel that it is possible to love someone yet still succumb to temptation. Not all participants agreed with this view- some believed strongly in the commitment associated with love: “I’m going to be accountable for...the love I give that person. I’m not going to go back on my word...it’s all I got.” Men in both age groups indicated that they respect monogamy and feel that a monogamous relationship is the ideal. However, the majority of participants were also tolerant of cheating among their peers and men in general: “...when I know someone who isn’t monogamous, I don’t look at them any different. I just say ‘that’s a man doing what a man does.’”

Safer sex and risk behaviors. When asked about condom use, the majority of participants indicated that they would appreciate a woman suggesting they use a condom but may also wonder if that meant she was sleeping with someone else. Participants said they know they should use condoms in certain situations but still do not- for example, during oral sex. Participants listed many instances when they feel that condom use is not warranted: during receptive oral sex because it affects sensation, when in love, when in a long-term relationship or married, having tested negative and currently using a hormonal contraceptive and also when a man feels comfortable having unprotected oral sex, he usually feels comfortable having unprotected vaginal sex.

Lastly, participants felt that there are quite a few factors that contribute to racial disparities in rates of sexually transmitted infections: lack of parental supervision and guidance, influence of the neighborhood and peers to engage in sexually risky behavior and men on the “down-low”. One group also touched on the fact that some black men go to prison where they have sex with other men due to force or lack of other options and then bring home infections to their female partners when they are released.

Discussion

Table 1.

Focus group participant demographics

| Characteristics | Group | | | Total |
|-------------------------|--------|--------|--------|---------|
| | 25+ | 18-24 | 18-24 | |
| Number of Participants | 6 | 7 | 10 | 23 |
| Age | | | | |
| 17-20 | 0 (0) | 3 (43) | 3 (30) | 6 (21) |
| 21-24 | 0 (0) | 4 (57) | 7 (70) | 11 (48) |
| 25-29 | 3 (50) | 0 (0) | 0 (0) | 3 (13) |
| 30+ | 3 (50) | 0 (0) | 0 (0) | 3 (13) |
| Class Rank | | | | |
| First-year | 0 (0) | 1 (14) | 0 (0) | 1 (4) |
| Second-year | 0 (0) | 2 (29) | 0 (0) | 2 (9) |
| Third-year | 1 (17) | 1 (14) | 4 (40) | 6 (26) |
| Fourth-year | 2 (33) | 3 (43) | 5 (50) | 10 (43) |
| Not a student/No answer | 3 (50) | 0 (0) | 1 (10) | 4 (17) |

Table 2.

Sexual behavior characteristics of male focus group participants

| Question | | Group | | | Total |
|---|---------------------|--------|--------|----------|---------|
| | | 25+ | 18-24 | 18-24 | |
| Do you have an intimate partner? | Yes | 5 (83) | 5 (71) | 0 (0) | 10 (43) |
| | No | 1 (17) | 2 (29) | 10 (100) | 13 (57) |
| Did you use protection the last time you had vaginal, oral, or anal sex? | Yes | 3 (50) | 4 (57) | 8 (80) | 15 (65) |
| | No | 3 (50) | 3 (43) | 2 (20) | 8 (35) |
| | Not sexually active | 0 (0) | 0 (0) | 0 (0) | 0 (0) |
| Do you intend to use protection the next time you have vaginal, oral or anal sex? | Yes | 3 (50) | 6 (86) | 9 (90) | 18 (78) |
| | No | 2 (33) | 1 (14) | 1 (10) | 4 (17) |
| | Not sexually active | 1 (17) | 0 (0) | 0 (0) | 1 (4) |
| Have you been tested for HIV? | Yes | 5 (83) | 6 (86) | 5 (50) | 16 (70) |
| | No | 1 (17) | 1 (14) | 5 (50) | 7 (30) |