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## “It Takes a Village:” Familial Messages Regarding Dating Among African American Adolescents

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### Abstract

There is a dearth of research regarding the influence of family members on adolescent dating. This study explored messages that African American adolescents received from family members regarding dating attitudes, norms and behaviors. Qualitative interviews were conducted with sexually experienced urban African American heterosexual adolescents (N = 51) between the ages of 15–17. Analyses revealed that participants received a diversity of messages from a range of both nuclear and extended family members, and that these messages were organized around three temporal phases of dating: initiation, maintenance, and termination. Types and sources of messages are discussed, as well as implications for intervention development.

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Although research has demonstrated the central role that family members play in developmental processes during adolescence (Huang & Stormshak, 2011; Johnson, 2010), there is a dearth of studies that have specifically examined the influence of family members on adolescent dating relationships among African American youth. For early adolescents, roles related to sexual behavior are created and negotiated through interactions with significant others, such as parents (Christopher, 2001). In addition, parents' romantic relationships often serve as a template for how their children construct their own romantic relationships (Sassler, Cunningham, & Lichter, 2009). Because prior research has demonstrated that dating is the primary site of sexual activity for adolescents (Kaestle & Halpern, 2007; Manning, Longmore, & Giordano, 2000), it is critical to understand the role that family members play in shaping health-promoting dating behaviors. Given the importance of extended family members in the developmental trajectories of African American adolescents (Gerstel, 2011; Jones, Zalot, Foster, Sterrett, & Chester, 2007; Wilson, 1986, 1989), it is critical to examine the range of messages that youth receive from various family members regarding dating.

### Dating Among Adolescents

Adolescent dating relationships are characterized by mutually acknowledged voluntary interactions, expressions of affection, and potentiality of current or anticipated sexual behavior (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009; Furman & Shomaker, 2008). Therefore, these relationships are useful in the development and cultivation independence, interdependence, and compromise (Collins, 2003; Connolly, Craig, Goldberg, & Pepler, 2004; Furman, 2002).

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The majority of adolescents report having been involved in or wanting to be involved in a dating relationship (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003), with some studies suggesting that up to three fourths of adolescents are or have been involved in romantic relationships at least once (Bouchey & Furman, 2003). According to the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (UNC Carolina Population Center, 2010), females' first romantic relationships occur at 16.48 years and males' first romantic relationships occur at 14.96 years. There is also similarity in the age of dating onset across ethnic groups, with White, African American, Latino/a, and Asian American youth reporting an average age of approximately 15 when they began dating (UNC Carolina Population Center, 2010).

First dating experiences typically occur at earlier ages than sexual intercourse (Regan, Durvasula, Howell, Ureño, & Rea, 2004). Although some research has examined circumstances where adolescent sexual behavior occurs outside of a romantic context, a majority of research has found that dating is the primary site where sexual activity occurs (Kaestle & Halpern, 2007; Manning et al., 2000). Due to this nesting, literature on adolescent sexual partnering is often inherently related to dating, although romantic aspects of relationships are rarely explored. Instead, the primary focus is typically on the consequences of engaging in sexual activity (e.g., pregnancy, STIs, sexual violence), and if sexual partners are referenced it is typically with regard to characteristics of these partners that may increase the likelihood of negative sexual health outcomes (cf. Jennings, Glass, Parham, Adler, & Ellen, 2004; Sales et al., 2011). Even in more recent studies where romantic partnership status was explored, the focus was still on sexual activity or contraceptive use within the context of a relationship (e.g., Bouris et al., 2011; Manlove et al., 2011).

Literature on dating among African American adolescents has largely focused on intimate partner violence (IPV) within the context of heterosexual dating relationships (Martin, Houston, Mmari, & Decker, 2011; Raiford, Wingood, & DiClemente, 2007; Salazar, Wingood, DiClemente, Lang, & Harrington, 2004). One exception is Harper, Dolcini, Gannon, Watson, and Catania's (2004) exploration of the role of close friends in the dating and sexual behavior of urban African American adolescents. They found that close friends play a critical role in shaping African American adolescents' conceptualizations of dating and sexual roles, acquiring new dating and sexual partners, and in determining the course of dating and sexual relationships. Although this information regarding the role of friends in the dating behavior of adolescents is helpful in better understanding this developmentally critical behavior among African American adolescents, more information is needed regarding the additional influences of other significant people in the lives of adolescents, especially nuclear and extended family members.

## Family Influences on Dating and Sexual Activity

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory (BST; Bronfenbrenner, 1995, 2005) is a useful theoretical framework for understanding ecological systems and factors that influence the dating and sexual behavior of African American adolescents. Use of an ecological approach allows for the examination of youth within their social contexts and assists with understanding reciprocal relationships between individuals and their environment. BST (Bronfenbrenner, 1995, 2005) asserts that human development occurs at different levels of social interaction and within multiple environmental systems. These developmental processes are bidirectional and occur between individuals and their environments with the interconnectedness of each system and their consequent interaction with the individuals. Proximal processes that occur within the microsystem and involve progressively more complex reciprocal interactions with other people, such as is often seen with family members, typically have the most influence on child and adolescent development

(Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). In discussing the important influence of these complex reciprocal interactions between parent and child on development, Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) highlighted that close relationships with adults other than parents (such as relatives) that involve complex reciprocal activity also play a key role in development.

Although Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1992) understood interpersonal dynamics such as those that occur with dating and sexual activity to occur at a dyadic level of interaction, other ecological systemic factors such as the family are also thought to affect these sexual behaviors (Corcoran, 2000; Voison, DiClemente, & Salazar, 2006). Several empirical literature reviews and theoretical articles also support the notion that adolescent dating and sexual behaviors are affected by intersecting ecological systems of influence that include family influences (DiClemente, Salazar, & Crosby, 2007; Kotchick, Shaffer, Forehand, & Miller, 2001).

Research on parental influences on the sexual behavior of African American adolescents has been heavily focused on parent-adolescent communication regarding sex. Several studies have demonstrated that African American adolescents whose parents talk with them about sexual activity and sexual protection are more likely to delay the onset of sexual activity and/or engage in lower rates of sexual risk behaviors than their counterparts whose parents do not discuss such matters (DiClemente et al., 2001; Miller, Kotchick, Dorsey, Forehand, & Ham, 1998; Miller & Whitaker, 2001). In addition, parent-adolescent communication can even buffer the effects of peers who may be encouraging peers to have sexual activity (Dilorio, McCarty, Denzmore, & Landis, 2007; Fasula & Miller, 2006). The majority of these studies have focused on communication between mothers and adolescents, as earlier studies demonstrated that mothers of African American adolescents were the primary parental communicators about sexual topics (Miller et al., 1998).

For the most part these studies have explored parent-adolescent communication regarding sexual risk and protective behaviors and have not explored communication related to dating. One exception is a study by Akers, Yonas, Burke, and Chang (2011) that analyzed focus group data from a larger study that was focused on parent-adolescent communication about sex in African American families. They found that discussions about IPV and healthy relationships were almost universally reported by parents and adolescents, and that parents transmit their values and expectations regarding dating and romantic relationships through these conversations. A major finding was that parents generally worry about their daughters' relationship safety, whereas they worry about their sons' capacity to show respect for partners (Akers et al., 2011).

In addition to parent-adolescent communication, some studies have explored other systemic sources of information and messages about sexuality and relationships for African American adolescents. Epstein and Ward (2008) found that while male adolescents in general reported receiving less communication about sexual information from their parents than from media and peers, African American males reported receiving more communication from their parents than did White, Latino, and Asian American males. These various sources typically presented conflicting messages with parental messages being focused on abstinence and contraception, whereas peer and media messages were more focused on promoting sexual activity (Epstein & Ward, 2008). When exploring underlying attitudes of African American mothers and daughters that could affect sexual communication, Aronowitz, Todd, Agbeshie, and Rennells (2007) found that mothers communicated many negative messages about males and their sexual intents (e.g., they are "predators" and only want sex; they are not honest) to their daughters. The authors suggest that these negative messages regarding males

and sex may prohibit adolescents from talking openly with their mothers about sex-related topics (Aronowitz et al., 2007).

Teitelman, Bohinski, and Boente (2009) explored sources of where African American and White female adolescents learned about sex, sexuality, and relationships. They found that family, friends/peers, partners, school, and the media were the most common sources of information about these topics, and that the messages from these sources were often conflicting. In general, messages from family members focused on waiting to have sex or to date, sexual risk/protection, abuse, and taking charge of their lives or their relationships. Participants in this study stated that most family messages regarding sex, sexuality, and relationships were received from mothers, with additional information and advice being given by fathers, aunts, uncles, grandparents, older siblings, and older cousins (Teitelman et al., 2009). Although not the central focus of this study, this qualitative investigation is one of the only ones that has explored messages from other family members besides parents, and that assessed messages regarding dating relationships.

The current study is focused on exploring the range of messages African American adolescents receive from multiple family members regarding dating norms and behaviors. Although prior research has examined the influence of parent-adolescent communication on the sexual behaviors of adolescents, studies have not systematically explored family communication specifically related to dating and romantic relationships—the context within which most sexual activity occurs for adolescents (Kaestle & Halpern, 2007; Manning et al., 2000).

In addition, studies also have not conducted an in-depth analysis of the range of messages youth receive from multiple family members regarding dating norms and behaviors for heterosexual African American adolescents. Given the strong influence of extended family members on African American adolescents (Gerstel, 2011; Jones et al., 2007; Wilson, 1986, 1989), it is critical to understand the potential influences of an array of family members including mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, grandmothers, and grandfathers.

## Method

### Participants

Participants for this study were 51 African American youth (male = 31, female = 20) between ages 15 and 17 at the time of recruitment. These youth represented a subsample of adolescents who participated in a larger qualitative research study focused on gender ideologies and their relationship to dating and sex. To take part in the study, participants had to have met the following eligibility criteria: (1) identify as African American or Black, (2) be between ages 15 and 17 (inclusive), and (3) endorse predominant sexual behavior with persons of the opposite sex. The 51 youth selected for analysis in this study met those criteria but additionally met the criteria of being sexually active, as defined by having ever had penetrative intercourse with a person of the opposite sex.

### Procedure

All participants were recruited from Chicago and San Francisco community-based, youth-serving agencies. Youth were living in low-income neighborhoods. The neighborhoods from which the participants were selected were comparable with respect to high rates of poverty, unemployment, school dropouts, incarceration, and STI prevalence (Bocksay, Harper-Jemison, Gibbs, Weaver, & Thomas, 2007; City and County of San Francisco, 2006; San Francisco Department of Public Health, 2007). The primary differences between the areas chosen in the two cities are differing population densities of African Americans (93% in the Chicago neighborhoods and 53% in the San Francisco neighborhoods) and overall African

American population size in the cities (more in Chicago than San Francisco). Once eligibility for the larger study was established through a screening procedure, parental consent and youth assent were obtained. The youth then participated in individual, semistructured qualitative interviews administered by trained, ethnic minority interviewers in a private setting. When possible, the gender of the participant and interviewer were matched.

All interviews took place in spring and summer 2010, and participants were compensated for their time. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Accuracy of transcription was checked by members of the research team involved in data collection.

### Interview Guide

A semistructured qualitative interview guide was developed specifically for the larger study by a team of researchers experienced in working with African American youth. The interview was grounded in a phenomenological framework, which provided a general structure for discussion but required participants to provide their own definitions based on life experiences and perceptions. The interview protocol covered multiple aspects of sex and dating relationships, including gendered images of African American adolescents, sources of information about sex, norms about sexual activity and relationships, ideal romantic partners, advice about dating and relationships, sexual communication, and future life expectations. In line with our phenomenological framework the term *family* was not specifically defined in the interview, so youth were allowed to identify and discuss any individuals who they viewed as “family.”

### Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using a phenomenological framework, which focuses the analysis on describing what a given group of participants have in common as they experience a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002). To assist with classifying, sorting, and retrieving coded text during the analysis process, transcribed interviews were entered into QSR International's NVivo 7 software prior to analysis.

Data coding and analysis were iterative and interactive processes conducted by a data analysis team which consisted of the first four authors, three of whom identify as African American. The first step involved reading all interview transcripts to increase familiarity with the data. After all of the transcripts were read and reviewed, content codes were created collaboratively by the data analysis team to capture the experiences described by participants, and a codebook was created that included operational definitions of all codes. Transcripts were then reread and pattern codes were created to connect subsequent concepts under larger headings within each transcript. Following this, consistent patterns in meaning, concepts, and themes across all interviews were identified (Creswell, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994), and data matrices were created as visual representations of the findings to further assist in the analysis process. Coding and analysis activities were discussed by members of the data analysis team during weekly meetings, and discrepancies in coding and interpretation were resolved through discussion and consensus.

### Results

The results below illustrate the diversity of messages youth receive from a wide range of family members, nuclear and extended. These messages are organized around three temporal phases of dating: initiation, maintenance, and termination. The *initiation phase* refers to the time period before a formal dating relationship has been established. The *maintenance phase* refers to the time period during a formal dating relationship, and the *termination phase* refers

to the time period during a formal dating relationship, and the refers to the time period when a relationship has, or will soon be, ended.

Within each temporal phase, salient themes that emerged from the data are presented accompanied by one or more illustrative quotes. Several quotes contain the letter *P* at the beginning of a statement to denote that it is the participant speaking, or the letter *I* at the beginning of a statement to denote that it is the interviewer speaking. Pseudonyms have been used to ensure the confidentiality of participants.

### Initiation Phase (Pre-Relationship)

When examining the messages received regarding initiating a dating relationship, two primary themes emerged: dating initiation and partner selection. Dating initiation messages were those that youth received from family members regarding how to start a new dating relationship. Three subthemes or types of dating initiation messages were revealed: passive communication, active communication, and general approach to initiating a dating partnership.

Passive communication messages included those received from family about passive ways to communicate interest or disinterest to a potential dating partner; these methods conveyed interest or disinterest through subtle gestures (e.g., smiles, offering compliments, etc.). Janet remarked how her family has told her when interested in a young man to be “flirty,” but not to directly communicate sexual interest.

Like be subtle ... be ladylike, be flirty, but don't be like, “Rah! I want you. let's get it crackin'.” Not like that because that sometimes drive a boy away.... Be more like —let them know what your intentions is, that you want to get to know them, but don't just try to bring up sex immediately because that make you look like a slut.  
(Janet, 16-year-old female, Chicago)

Active communication messages were those received from family about active ways to communicate interest or disinterest to a potential dating partner. These methods were often direct actions, including verbal communication and unambiguous nonverbal signals (e.g., sexual touching). Although young women in our sample, like Janet, were often encouraged to communicate interest passively, the young men in our sample were often encouraged to directly approach young women. James shared advice he received from his uncle.

I: Have you learned about how to meet a new girl from someone and what ideas did you get from them?

P: From an uncle; like telling me some pick-up lines. Like we could start it off like an icebreaker start off the conversation and basically, once you start a conversation, just keep it going as long as you can. (James, 16-year-old male, San Francisco)

General approach to initiating a dating partnership messages were those messages communicated by family members about how to initiate a dating relationship that did not relate to physically attracting or communicating with potential partners. These messages reflected general ways of being that would result in successfully initiating relationships. Frequently, youth were encouraged to be genuine in their interactions.

I: Okay. Have you ever learned how to meet a new guy from a boyfriend?

P: Unh-uh. [No]

I: What about from family?

P: Be yourself.

I: Okay. Who says that?

P: My momma. (Gail, 16-year-old female, Chicago)

Partner selection messages were messages received from family about how to choose a dating partner; these messages described the type of partner youth should or should not “bring home.” Messages were generally protective and encouraged youth to choose partners whom family members deemed appropriate. These generally included choosing partners who were not engaged in negative behaviors, who treated the youth with respect, and who had goals. Lisa, a 15-year-old female from Chicago, reported hearing this message from multiple family members:

I: What kind of advice did you get?

P: Like you should be with somebody who's actually doing something with his life, who actually wants to make it and who won't pull you down in drama that they're in. Stuff like [be with someone] who's not in trouble. That's basically the stuff that I heard.

I: And you say your family—like which family members in particular? Can you think of any?

P: Everyone. Grandmother, mom, cousins, uncles, aunties, everyone. (Lisa, 15-year-old female, Chicago)

Overall, dating initiation messages were generally provided to youth by family members in an attempt to protect youth and prepare them for healthy and productive dating relationships.

### Quality of Relationships/Maintenance Phase (Relationship)

Six primary themes emerged with regard to types of messages youth received about the maintenance and quality of dating relationships: “things to do,” “things not to do,” self-care in relationships, potential consequences of dating relationships, dating violence, and persuasion of dating partners.

“Things to do” messages were those received from family members about behaviors that should be enacted to ensure the success of a dating relationship.

Four subthemes of “things to do” were revealed: mutual independence, pleasing your partner, respecting your partner, and dating behaviors. Mutual independence messages relayed ideas about the degree to which the youth or his or her romantic partner should be independent; these messages related to maintaining an identity separate from your partner, and preserving time that is separate from one's dating partner. Henry's mother advised him to let his girlfriend make independent choices.

I: What kind of advice did your mother give you?

P: Like she told me to let her [female dating partner] live her life some, like not trying to be overprotective. Like she going to be there but, if she want to go do this, then let her go do this because you can't stop a person if they really want to go do something. Just let them go do it. (Henry, 16-year-old male, San Francisco)

Pleasing your partner messages were messages received from family members about how to keep one's partner satisfied. These messages related to satisfaction achieved by compliance to partner's wishes, completion of household tasks, and sexual interactions. Tonya, a 16-year-old girl from San Francisco, discussed advice she received from her stepmother regarding skills that a young woman must learn to “keep a man:”

Yeah, I learned that to keep a guy when you get older you have to learn how to cook. You got to know how to do hair, just in case you're having kids, you could just do her hair, do your daughter hair and if your boyfriend got hair, you can do his

hair too. But, yeah, she told me I gotta learn how to cook, do hair, keep the house clean, be book smart and also street smart and yeah.

(Tonya, 16-year-old female, San Francisco)

Another young woman was told by her mother and a female cousin that she must please her male partner sexually. This included engaging in any sexual act he may want to try “at least once.”

I: What kind of advice do they give you?

P: Um, they give nasty advice, stuff like um, I don't know, well no, not really, only advice that I got, if you don't do it, another girl will. Like you know, so if your boy want you to do it, try it at least once. Like you know, or he'll find another girl who will do it. Things like that.

I: So you have to have sex with him otherwise he's going to find somebody else?

P: Um-hum [Yes], and that's not always true. (Barbara, 16-year-old female, San Francisco)

It is interesting to note that although it was communicated to Barbara that she should be sexually acquiescent to her partner or risk him being unfaithful, she evaluated this message as untrue. Respecting your partner messages were messages received from family members regarding how youths can show respect to a dating partner. This message of respect was only communicated to males in our sample. It included various ways that one must show a young woman respect such as addressing her properly, treating her well, and exhibiting manners. Corey, a 16-year-old male from Chicago recalls receiving this advice from his aunt: “Probably my auntie. She just told me, like whatever I do, always just treat a girl right, and treat her with respect”.

Dating behaviors messages were messages received from family about appropriate behaviors while on a date with a partner. As with messages encouraging participants to respect their partner, appropriate dating behavior messages were only communicated to males in our sample. These messages generally consisted of specific chivalrous practices that males should engage in while on a date. One 17-year-old male remarked:

P: And some other advice that I've gotten, like it might be like make sure you open the door for her or like if you can, try to pay for her, or something like that.

I: Pay for her when you all are out?

P: Yeah, stuff like that. (Sean, 17-year-old male, San Francisco)

“Things not to do” messages were messages received from family members about behaviors youth should avoid to strengthen the possibility of success of their dating relationships. These messages varied in content including messages encouraging youth to refrain from violence within a dating relationship, messages warning youth not to reveal their bad habits to a partner, and messages like the one below, warning Molly, a 16-year-old female from San Francisco, not to become pregnant to maintain a relationship.

I: Okay so where did you learn about these kind of stereotypes? For example like you know young Black girls are teen moms. So where did you learn about that—that stereotype?

P: I think I just heard it one time.

I: From?



P: I forgot where I heard it from, but I just know I heard it and I was like—I think my granny—Yeah, I think my granny, my grandma she was tellin' me about like all the Black—well, all the Black people expect Black people to do. And she was like especially Black girls and she told me that a lot of— she was telling me a lot of Black girls be droppin' out of school and it's like they all be doin' it [dropping out of school] `cause some boy or sometimes they just do it for they selves. And that some girls just be getting pregnant because they think that having a baby is gonna make the boy love them and want to be with them, but they don't know that that's just pushing a boy away. So it's like I'm kinda glad she did come and tell me about the baby situation, because I kinda don't want to be a teen mom. I want to wait to try to pursue my dreams and stuff and have like money to provide for my baby and stuff. (Molly, 16-year-old female, San Francisco)

Self-care in relationships messages were messages received from family regarding how to protect oneself from potential harm that may result from a dating relationship. Three subthemes emerged within self-care in relationships messages: familial–child communication related to dating, level of commitment to dating partners, and moderating trust. Familial–child communications related to dating messages were those messages received from family that encourage open communication with family members about dating relationships. Shirley, a 16-year-old female from Chicago, discusses her mother encouraging her to communicate openly:

I: What about your mom? Does your mom ever give—like tell you things about how you should be, how you should act, or what you should do?

P: Yes. Well, I've got a boyfriend that I bring around her, so she tells me like don't let him pressure me into doing nothing. I don't need him for nothing.

If I need anything, I can come to her. And always be myself. (Shirley, 16-year-old female, Chicago)

Level of commitment to dating partners messages were those messages received from family members about the degree to which youth should commit to any one dating partner. These messages reminded youth that they were young and therefore should have other priorities than being in a “serious” or “committed” relationship or warned youth that their dating partner may be untrustworthy therefore they should not be in a relationship. Shirley indicated that her older cousin told her that all boys were “dogs,” therefore she shouldn't have a boyfriend.

I: And do other people in your family tell you what you should be like as a young woman?

P: Sometimes. They tell me like I shouldn't be in a committed relationship because all the boys are dogs, so I should just have friends, but you know.

I: No boyfriend?

P: Right.

I: And who in your family says that?

P: My older cousin. (Shirley, 16-year-old female, Chicago)

Sean's uncle felt that he should be concentrating on school and basketball, and that a girlfriend was something that could wait.

P: Like, I've got like—well, I've been told that I shouldn't have a girlfriend before. Like, I've been told—like my uncle tells me that he thinks that I should leave girls alone and I should focus on school and basketball.

I: Okay.

P: And then wait until after school and stuff. (Sean, 17-year-old male, San Francisco)

Moderating trust messages were messages received from family members regarding the degree to which the youth should trust and/or exhibit vulnerability to a dating partner. These messages, though they did not specifically attempt to deter youth from being in a relationship, did reflect the idea that dating partners may not be genuine in their intentions therefore youth should not trust them. These messages were only communicated to young women in our sample. Gail discusses hearing the message that boys should not be trusted from her father:

I: What kind of advice have you gotten from him [participant's father]?

P: Don't trust them [male dating partners] because he knows—he says he knows what all the boys want from a girl.

I: So daddy says don't trust your boyfriend?

P: Yeah. (Gail, 16-year-old female, Chicago)

Potential consequences of dating messages were messages received from family about the potential negative outcomes (e.g., negative emotional, physical, health, and/or reputational effects) of engaging in a dating relationship. These messages often reflected the idea that a dating relationship can distract a youth from their priorities. Thomas, a 16-year-old male from San Francisco, indicates his mother told him girls can have a negative influence:

P: My mom always say, like, "Sometimes girls get you off track."

I: Okay. All right, have you gotten advice from other people about girlfriends?

P: Just my mom. (Thomas, 16-year-old male, San Francisco)

The consequences of dating also can be permanent and life altering as Lisa discusses her family telling her the dangers of teenage pregnancy:

P: Just they just been telling me, giving me advice on being a teenager because they've been there before. And they just tell me some stories about what they've been through as a teenager and stuff.

I: Okay, what what? What would that be like?

P: Like the boys, what happened between boys. How pregnancy, how teenage pregnancy can mess up the rest of your life or it can mess up school or college or your mind frame could go bad over because of these boys. (Lisa, 15-year-old female, Chicago)

Partner violence messages were messages received from family members regarding unacceptability of violence in the context of a dating relationship. The messages received by young men communicated that they should not perpetuate violence, whereas the messages received by young women communicated that they should not tolerate violence within a relationship. Jack, a 17-year-old male from San Francisco, discussed receiving the message of not engaging in dating violence within the context of general behaviors that reflect respect of a partner:

I: Okay. What kind of advice did you get from your mom and dad?

P: Don't put your hands on them. Call `em by their name. Treat them with respect.

I: Okay. What kind of advice did you get from your sisters?

P: Same thing. Treat `em right. Like treat `em right. Just keep them positive. Like just keep them on your good side. (Jack, 17-year-old male, San Francisco)

Kelly, a 17-year-old female related that her family told her not to accept violence within a dating relationship, and like the young man above, the message seemed to also be related to respect:

Family do. They tell me a good—positive stuff. They always say don't let a man put his hands on you and make sure he respecting you, 'cause if he can't respect you then he can't respect himself, and make sure he treating you right, don't have sex if you don't know him like that. Gotta get to know him before you do all that. They tell me a lot of positive stuff. (Kelly, 17-year-old female, Chicago)

Persuasion of dating partner messages were messages received from family members about how to persuade a dating partner to do something the youth wants him or her to do. These messages related to ensuring benefit from a dating relationship through such persuasion. Henry related this as a reversal of traditional gender roles:

`Cause I like to sometimes—or mostly I like for girls to take me out to do stuff and my cousins and uncles around me, they all taught me how to persuade a girl to take me to the movies instead of me taking her like it was the other way around. (Henry, 16-year-old male, San Francisco)

Overall, maintenance phase messages provided direction and guidance on how to maintain a dating relationship and generally offered youth advice on preferred patterns of interactions with dating partners, while still including elements of self protection.

### Termination Phase (Post-Relationship)

Only one theme emerged from the post-relationship phase: termination of dating relationship. These messages were messages received from family about when and/or how to end a dating relationship. When discussing how to end a relationship, messages reflected that youth should be direct yet show compassion:

Because I was trying to like—I was talking to this girl for a long—I was trying to break up with her but I just didn't know how to. My dad just told me like let her down easy and tell her you're not my type anymore, not what I'm looking for. (James, 16-year-old male, San Francisco)

In discussing when to end relationships, messages reflected circumstances such as when a partner is treating you badly, when you are not receiving what you would like from a relationship, or when you feel you do not want to be in that specific relationship anymore. Karen, a 16-year-old female from San Francisco, recounts her sister's advice:

Like, when me and my boyfriend be arguing, I tell her [participant's sister] what's going on and what's happened, and she tell me like, you know, if I don't feel like I don't wanna be with him, don't be with him. “Don't put up with nobody mess. And don't let nobody treat you any kinda way. And if you want a fairy tale, and they don't, then that means you got to go find your prince somewhere else.” That's what she always tells me. (Karen, 16-year-old female, Chicago)

Overall, termination phase messages encouraged youth to be compassionate and direct as they end a relationship that either no longer meets their needs or presents emotional or physical danger.

## Variety of Sources

Youth in this study received dating/relationship messages from a wide variety of family members, many of whom were beyond the traditional “nuclear” family including cousins, uncles, aunts, and grandparents. For each category of messages, Table 1 illustrates the gender(s) that received the message, and the sources from which those messages were received.

When exploring the various types of messages youth received from family members, the data reveal that the person from whom adolescents received the largest number of types of messages was mothers (12 of 16 types; 75.0%), followed by siblings (11 of 16 types; 68.8%). Three categories of family members—fathers, aunts uncles, and cousins—offered the next largest variety of messages, with all three groups offering 8 of the 16 types of messages (50.0%). The relatives that offered the fewest different types of messages were grandparents (4 of 16 types; 25.0%). The vast majority of types of messages were reported by females and males (10 of 16 types; 62.5%), followed by male-only messages (4 of 16 types; 25.0%) and female-only messages (2 of 16 types; 12.5%). Thematically male-only messages were focused on “appropriate” interactions with females, whereas female-only messages were focused on self-care.

## Discussion

Although prior research has explored communication between African American mothers and their adolescent children regarding sexual activity and found that it does play an influential role in sexual risk and health (DiClemente et al., 2001; Miller et al., 1998; Miller & Whitaker, 2001); with the exception of Akers et al. (2011), these studies have not explored communication regarding dating and romantic relationships. This study expands this area of inquiry by examining the influential role of multiple family members and by focusing specifically on communication regarding various aspects of dating and romantic relationships. In addition, the use of a qualitative phenomenological research framework allowed for a nuanced investigation of these messages, thus allowing for a complex understanding of how family members may influence the development of adolescents' dating attitudes, norms, and patterns of behavior.

The current data demonstrate that family members discuss an array of complex issues related to dating relationships with African American adolescents. These discussions occur with an array of family members, including mothers, siblings, fathers, aunts uncles, cousins, and grandparents. Messages that adolescents receive from family members focus on a progression of temporal phases of dating relationships, ranging from initiation, to maintenance, to termination. Family messages include a mix of those that directly and indirectly promote sexual health, as well as those that directly and indirectly promote health-risk behaviors. Adolescents also did not always receive consistent messages, with some family members promoting one set of behaviors or attitudes, and others promoting alternative ways to view dating relationships.

## Sources of Familial Messages about Dating

When exploring the sources of messages youth received from family members, mothers and siblings, respectively, offered the two largest varieties of types of messages. This is in alignment with Bronfenbrenner's (1994; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) notion that proximal processes within the microsystem that involve progressively more complex reciprocal interactions with other people, such as would likely be the case for interactions with mothers and sibling, typically have the most influence on child and adolescent development. The finding that mothers provide the most extensive advice regarding sex and

sexuality in their conversations with adolescents has been supported in prior studies (Aronowitz et al., 2007; Miller et al., 1998; Teitelman et al., 2009). The significant role of messages from siblings has not been previously demonstrated. There is variability in the roles that siblings play in providing messages to adolescents regarding dating and relationships, depending on the age of the sibling. In some circumstances the sibling may serve a function similar to a peer, whereas in other situations they may serve as a “younger” maternal or paternal figure. This range of potential functions likely increased the scope of messages received from siblings in this study.

From a developmental perspective, siblings are important socializing agents that can have a prolonged influence on children and adolescents because siblings often spend more time with each other than with parents (Dunn, 2000), and sibling relationships are typically the longest relationships most individuals will ever have (Noller, 2005). Although prior studies have not specifically examined the impact of messages from siblings on dating relationships, literature supports that siblings relate to each other in varied ways and can function as “attachment figures, antagonists, playmates, protectors and socializers” (Davies & Limbo, 2010, p. 69). During adolescence, older siblings in particular often become an important source of advice (Tucker, Barber, & Eccles, 1997). Widmer (1997) found that the sexual behavior of older brothers significantly influenced timing of younger siblings' sexual debut such that when older brothers had not yet initiated sex, younger siblings of both genders had a significantly lower chance of having initiated sex. In addition to direct verbal messages from siblings, this type of indirect messaging (or modeling) was also reported in the current sample. The finding that the number of different messages received from siblings regarding dating was second only to mothers suggests that siblings can have a significant influence on dating attitudes, norms, and behaviors for African American adolescents, and that it is a phenomenon that warrants further investigation.

When examining messages from fathers, it was revealed that message variability for fathers was similar to that for aunts/uncles and cousins. There were only two message types that were promoted by fathers but not mothers, both of which were only reported by one gender. The male-only message promoted by fathers focused on giving advice on “appropriate” behaviors for males within the context of dating or romantic relationships, whereas the female-only message promoted by fathers was a self-care message related to monitoring one's level of commitment in a relationship. This suggests that fathers were providing mentoring and instructional support to their male children, whereas they were providing protective advice and support to their female children. The female-specific findings are similar to a recent study of father-daughter communication which demonstrated that fathers were more likely to prepare their daughters for dating by offering philosophical advice or support, rather than specific information about dating (Hutchinson & Cederbaum, 2011). This study is one of the few that explored the role of fathers in the sexual socialization of adolescents, as there is a dearth of studies focused on father-adolescent sexual communication, with the vast majority only being focused on conversations with daughters (cf. Bowling & Werner-Wilson, 2000; Hutchinson & Cederbaum, 2011).

The data on the influence of cousins, aunts, and uncles is novel, as prior adolescent dating and sexual communication literature has not explored the influences of these extended family members. These findings are in alignment with prior literature that supports the importance of extended family members in the development of African American children and adolescents (Sudarkasa, 2007; Wilson, 1986, 1989). Despite prior studies which have demonstrated that grandmothers may play a parental role for urban African American adolescents (Rodgers & Jones, 1999), grandparents offered the fewest different types of dating and romantic relationship messages in this study. This may be related to

embarrassment in discussing sensitive topics with older family relatives, as was found in Teitelman et al.'s (2009) study.

Although prior research has not specifically focused on the role of immediate and extended family members on the dating socialization of African American adolescents, theoretical and empirical literature has emphasized the ways in which extended family members exert direct and indirect influences on the development of African American children and adolescents (Sudarkasa, 2007; Wilson, 1986, 1989). These findings regarding messages received by immediate and extended family members contributes to the adolescent-specific literature demonstrating the role of extended family members in influencing other adolescent health outcomes such as feelings of self-worth (McMahon, Felix, & Nagarajan, 2011), use of health care services (Shelton et al., 1993), and avoidance of drug use (Bowser & Word, 1993).

### **Role of Familial Messages in Shaping Gender Ideologies**

Data from this study suggest that the messages African American adolescents receive from family members regarding dating and romantic relationships may help to shape and reinforce gender ideologies, which refer to overall sets of beliefs that individuals and societies hold regarding how females and males are expected to think, feel, and act (e.g., Bem, 1993; Tolman & Porche, 2000). The development of gender ideologies can influence a host of health-promoting and health-risk behaviors and has been shown to play a central role in the development of sexual beliefs and behaviors for adolescents (Pleck, Sonenstein, & Ku, 1993; Tolman, Striepe, & Harmon, 2003). Hill (2002) explored the role of parents in shaping gender ideologies in their children specifically within African American families. Her qualitative work demonstrated that African American mothers and fathers “teach” gender roles by verbally and physically supporting certain gender-appropriate behaviors and discouraging non-gender-appropriate behaviors (Hill, 2002). Wallace (2007) also argued that this early gender socialization of African American children by their parents affects how they will enact gender-specific scripts and roles in their adult romantic relationships. What potential role other important family members may play in this shaping of gender ideologies has not been explored.

Two categories of familial messages in the current study seemed to support the shaping of traditional gender ideologies. Dating initiation messages reinforced the belief that males should be active and aggressive when pursuing a dating partner, whereas females should be passive and not “stand out” too much in order to let a potential dating partner approach them. In addition, females received the message that if they were interested in a potential male partner they should communicate this in subtle ways. This reinforcement of passive communication strategies may facilitate sexual risk as women who adhere to traditional gender roles within dating/romantic relationships are more likely to experience inhibited sexual health and less condom use self-efficacy (Fine & McClelland, 2006; Schick, Zucker, & Bay-Cheng, 2008).

Maintenance of relationship messages received from family members reinforced the idea that males are generally the perpetrators of IPV in a dating relationship, and that females are generally the victims or recipients of such violence. These gender-specific messages regarding IPV were also found in Akers et al.'s (2011) focus group study of the structure and content of sexual communication among African American adolescents and their parents. Although the gender-specific messages given by family regarding dating violence in this study were health promoting and protective in nature (i.e., males should not perpetrate violence and females should not tolerate violence), the unwitting communication of this gendered dynamic could contribute to the silencing of males who are recipients of such violence. In addition, females also may internalize the message that only males can be

perpetrators of violence and thus believe that physical aggression toward a male is appropriate because it will not hurt him. Such views of the gendered role that each partner plays in IPV situations may be contributing to empirical data that suggests that adolescent males have experienced dating violence at the same prevalence rate of adolescent females (Howard, Wang, & Yan, 2007; Howard, Wang, & Yan, 2008).

### Strengths and Limitations

This study is one of the first investigations to systematically explore the messages African American youth receive from a variety of family members regarding dating and romantic relationship. This line of inquiry is critical because extended family members often play a critical role in the development of African American youth. The sample for this study included a large number ( $N = 51$ ) of adolescents from two urban cities representing the West Coast and Midwest regions of the United States and focused on youth who were early in their sexual lives (ages 15–17). Eliciting qualitative data from youth at this developmental age is critical because they are actively engaged in the process of forming their attitudes, norms, and behavior patterns related to dating. The focus on dating as opposed to sexual activity is also a strength, because romantic relationships are developmentally important for the formation of adult relationships, and most adolescent sexual activity occurs within the context of a dating relationship.

Despite these strengths, there were limitations to this study. Participants were recruited from community-based organizations in low-income communities; therefore it is likely that only youth from lower socioeconomic status families were included. In addition, these youth also may represent more highly motivated youth because they were attending (and many receiving services from) community agencies. Because the focus of the larger study from which these data were extracted was not specifically on messages youth received from family members regarding dating and romantic relationships, the interviews may not have offered the level of depth that would reveal a more nuanced and detailed understanding of these messages. Also, because the interviews were conducted at only one point in time, it was not possible to explore the ultimate impact of familial messages on dating attitudes, norms, and behaviors.

### Implications for Interventions and Future Research

These findings suggest that family members should be actively engaged in sexual health promotion programs for African American adolescents, and that such programs should critically explore messages that multiple family members send to adolescents about dating. Adolescents and their influential family members may be engaged in the same intervention, which could include a mix of intervention activities where adolescents and family members receive separate instruction, as well as those that allow for family-based learning and facilitated interactions. These interventions should also explore the critical role of dating and romantic relationships in the sexual health and risk behaviors of adolescents. Evaluations of these interventions should also be conducted to assess their impact on development and behavior.

Future research should conduct a more in-depth analysis of the role of siblings in shaping African American adolescents' attitudes, norms, and behaviors related to dating, as well as explore the role of other extended family members in this process. More nuanced investigations of the differential messages offered by various family members would be beneficial, as well as explorations of youth's perceptions of, and reactions to, those messages that are received by different sources. Studies that also involve family members as research participants would be helpful in assessing the alignment between intended and received messages. Longitudinal studies could explore the ways in which various messages from a

range of family members affect the development of dating attitudes and norms, as well as self-reported dating and sexual behaviors of African American adolescents. These various studies should be conducted with youth and families from different ethnic/racial groups to explore similarities and differences. Future explorations of familial messages regarding dating would benefit from the use of mixed-methods approaches (qualitative and quantitative) and may wish to develop quantitative measures to more systematically examine familial messages.

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**Table 1**

## Types and Sources of Dating Messages

Type of Message	Gender of Youth Receiving Message	Source of Message (using participant's term)
Dating Initiation: Passive Communication	Female, Male	Brother, Mother
Dating Initiation: Active Communication	Female, Male	Cousin, Dad, Grandfather, Mom, Sister, Uncle
Dating Initiation: General Approaches	Female, Male	Brother, Cousin, Dad, Mother, Sister
Partner Selection	Female, Male	Aunt, Cousin, Grandma, Mom, Sister
Things to Do: Mutual Independence	Male	Brother, Mother
Things to Do: Pleasing your Partner	Female, Male	Brother, Cousin, Dad's Girlfriend, Mom
Things to Do: Respecting your Partner	Male	Aunt, Mother, Dad, Sister
Things to Do: Dating Behaviors	Male	Cousin, Father, Uncle
Things Not to Do	Female, Male	Aunt, Dad, Grandma, Mother, Sister
Self-Care: Familial-Child Communication	Female	Mom
Self-Care: Level of Commitment	Female, Male	Cousin, Dad, Uncle
Self-Care: Moderating Trust	Female	Dad
Potential Consequences of Dating Relationships	Female, Male	Aunt, Mom, Sister
Partner Violence	Female, Male	Dad, Mother, Sister
Persuasion of Dating Partners	Male	Cousin, Uncle
Termination of Dating Relationships	Female, Male	Cousin, Dad, Dad's Girlfriend, Grandma, Mom, Sister