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Characteristics of Preferred Partners: Variations Between African American Men and Women

Twinet Parmer

Researchers examined the interaction of gender and education as influences on mate selection characteristics for 55 male and 111 female African American college students at a historically Black college/university. Students, age 17 to 38, were asked to rate 22 mate selection characteristics according to their importance in selecting a partner. A factor analysis yielded three factor scores (social stratification, personality, and physical variables) that were significant only for gender across the social and physical variables.

The process of selecting a partner is a universal phenomenon prevalent in nearly all societies. Questions concerning heterosexual preferred partner characteristics in the social science and family literature have been raised for several decades (Allgeier & Wiederman, 1991; Buss, 1994; Hill, 1945; Spanier & Glick, 1980; Surra, 1990). Some of the questions that have been raised are: How do men and women choose mates? What characteristics are important in the selection process? Do these characteristics differ by age, education, or ethnicity? One of the factors driving interest in mate selection is the significance of marriage in society, given the link to families and children. Yet, little is known about the important characteristics in preferred partner selection (Buss, 1989). Previous research (Allgeier & Wiederman, 1991; Buss, 1989; Hill, 1945) has shown that gender is a significant variable, and according to Buss (1989) is maintained cross-culturally based on reproductive strategies.

One problem with understanding the process of mate selection has to do with differences given certain social, psychological, cultural, and economic relationship variables that may influence gender (Staples, 1985; Surra, 1990; Taylor, Chatters, Tucker, & Lewis, 1990). When con-

sidering these variables, the process of selection can be problematic for the general population; however, it is more problematic for African Americans. According to research findings, African Americans may report different preferences from the general population due to the influences of their unique slave history in America (Chimezie, 1985; Davis, 1995; Melton & Thomas, 1976; Parmer & Tam, 1992; Staples, 1985). Yet, little definitive information is available relative to mate selection and relationships as they relate to the heterosexual population of African Americans (Betha, 1995; Parmer & Tam, 1992; Staples, 1985; Taylor et al., 1990). Because differences between ethnic and racial groups exist in marriage and family structures, an examination of whether mate selection preferences differ among ethnic groups and whether they have remained unchanged over time as in the general population is important. The purpose of this study was to describe the 22 most important mate selection characteristics for African American male and female college students based on gender and grade level. In this study, mate selection and preferred partner are used interchangeably.

PREFERRED PARTNER PATTERNS

Hill's (1945) study conducted with college students at the University of Wisconsin was one of the earliest studies of mate selection in the social sciences. Hill asked students to select desirable attributes in a mate from a list of 18 characteristics. Students considered the most important characteristics to be dependable character, emotional stability, maturity, and pleasing disposition. When considering gender differences, women placed a higher value on ambition and industriousness in preferred partners whereas, in contrast, men placed more

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emphasis on having a mate who was a good cook and housekeeper. Although not ranked high on either list, good looks were more important for men than for women, whereas having a mate with good financial prospects was more important for women than for men.

Subsequent researchers who have used some variation of Hill's (1945) 18 characteristics as measures of mate selection (Allgeier & Wiederman, 1991; Hudson & Henze, 1969; McGinnis, 1958) reported that regardless of geographical differences or the passage of time, a striking consistency has occurred in all findings. As an example, Hudson and Henze replicated Hill's study, but with a broader sample. Students from four regions in the United States and Canada were included. Like Hill, Hudson and Henze found that dependable character and emotional stability ranked highest among mate selection characteristics. Chastity was less important for both men and women in each study. Interestingly, good looks ranked near the bottom for women but moved up in the rankings for men. In a more recent study of college students attending a central Ohio university, dependable character and emotional stability continued to be important (Allgeier, 1990; Allgeier & Wiederman). Another study involving a sample of students from 50 universities in 36 states confirmed that over time, the same preferences in mate selection characteristics have remained unchanged (West et al., 1995). Consistently, the characteristics of dependable character, emotional stability, pleasing disposition, and mutual attraction continued to rank at the top of the preferred partner list.

Himes (1949) authored one of the earliest studies conducted on mate selection among African Americans at a historically Black college/university (HBCU) in North Carolina. The Himes study was administered to 130 male and female students using a two-part questionnaire that contained 27 factors. Both groups ranked mutual attraction as the most important factor of the top six characteristics. Men ranked self-control as second and sociability as fourth followed by economic security, sex appeal, and being considerate. Women selected attractive disposition, neatness and refinement, and good health as their top-valued characteristics. Himes concluded that

the six top-ranked factors indicated a "deep concern with marital compatibility and harmonious personal relations with prospective mates" (p. 208). The least valued factors were ambition for social status, desire for children, similar education, religion, politics, and hair texture. Factors ranked as relatively unimportant in the Himes study were skin color, height, weight, social status, economic status, educational level, and age. Although Himes found that physical features were not significant, in the African American community physical traits, particularly those associated with White features (e.g., light skin, long hair, and "good" hair, which refers to texture that is soft, straight, and less kinky (Bonner, 1991; Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992)), are significant in mate selection (Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992; Sanders, Arnold, Bradley, & Ransom, 1995). Further, within the African American community possessing some measure of White features has served as a standard for what is considered to be physically attractive. Russell et al., in a study of skin color, defined these valued physical characteristics as a "psychological fixation about color and [physical] features that leads Blacks to discriminate against each other" (p. 2).

Susman and Yeager (1950) administered a modified version of the Himes (1949) questionnaire to African American and White college students in Connecticut. Generally, a similarity of preferences occurred for 14 factors, with mutual attraction ranked first by White men and African American women, whereas White women and African American men ranked these factors second. The characteristic ranked of least importance by all groups was similar politics. The next-to-least important factor for White students was ambition for social status, and similar religion for African American students. Susman and Yeager noted that these differences may be attributed to conditions "operating differently on the two groups" (p. 49). In a more recent study of African American and White students, Melton and Thomas (1976) examined mate selection traits along the dimensions of instrumental (i.e., basic activities that maintain the family) and expressive (i.e., activities that foster interpersonal relationship) expectations that partners may hold as important in marriage. Although both groups

placed similar values on expressive values of understanding and affection, Melton and Thomas found a significant difference between the two populations in the instrumental dimension. The Black students placed greater importance on the instrumental traits, and the difference was even more marked between Black men and White men. In the Melton and Thomas study, differences were explained by the discrepancy in economic opportunities between Black and White students upon leaving college. Thus, given that different factors may influence patterns of selection, understanding mate preference as a correlate to marriage is especially significant for African Americans.

AFRICAN AMERICAN RELATIONSHIP PATTERNS

Studies of differences between Blacks and Whites on the variable of mate selection confirm that cultural variations in relationship patterns do indeed exist (Albrecht, Fossett, Cready, & Kiecolt, 1997; Bethea, 1995; Taylor & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995; Tucker & Taylor, 1989). Along these lines, Buss and Barnes (1986) and Freeman (1974) have introduced the concept of preferential mating to explain in part these differences. They suggested that nonrandom variables governed by cultural and societal factors create a field of eligible mates who are available for selection. If variables are negative (economic status, educational attainment, unemployment, etc.), an individual may become "socially ineligible," a status that contributes to the "marriage squeeze" (Albrecht et al; Glick, 1988; Herr & Grossbard-Shechtman, 1981). The "marriage squeeze" refers to the phenomenon created when women outnumber single men (Glick). The "marriage squeeze" and "socially ineligible" variables may contribute to tension, conflict, and antagonistic interpersonal romantic relationships among African Americans (Cazenave, 1983; Franklin, 1984; Guttentag & Secord, 1983; Parmer & Tam, 1992). Historically, the conflict has been attributed to the consequences of African Americans adopting unique family patterns established in slavery, and living with racism and oppression in American society for almost 400 years (Chimezie, 1985; King & Griffin,

1983). Cazenave noted that "just as racial oppression in the U.S. has continued, [so has] the feeling that there is something fundamentally wrong in the relationship between black men and black women continues to persist" (p. 341).

An examination of current statistics may explain how experiences with racism and oppression have impacted the institution of marriage, as more eligible African American men are disenfranchised through negative experiences with the justice and educational systems. For example, in the United States, African American men are disproportionately represented in correctional institutions. This finding may reflect the fact that enrollment of African American males in elementary and secondary special education classes has increased and enrollment in higher education has declined (Chinn & Hughes, 1987). Lack of education, and the subsequent disenfranchisement are likely to decrease African American men's availability as potential mates (Albrecht et al., 1997; Tucker & Taylor, 1989). The extent to which the African American family is able to survive poverty and achieve a measure of stability may rest with the educational attainment of African American men and women. Parker, Berieda, & Sloan (1984) noted that "The hope for strong, productive, and unified Black families of the future rests, to a great extent, with college students who must serve as models. Poor relations between Black college students, however, seriously threaten this group's contribution to the building of strong Black families" (p. 40).

College experiences not only influence one's career path, but also foster long-term relationships that may lead to marriage. Duncan, Box, and Silliman (1996) reported that Black college students reported having less information about marriage preparation programs but felt that they had a need for such programs. Yet little is known about the out-of-class experiences of students in higher education, and even less is known about those of African American students in particular (DeSousa & Kuh, 1996). Lucas (1993) noted that little information is known about the emotional and psychological issues that confront students at predominately White universities. For African Americans, research has shown that academic and relationship variables are likely to be shaped

TABLE 1.
Analysis of Variance for Gender and Education for Social Stratification

Source	df	Sums of Square	Mean Square	F	Pr > F
Total	157	128.8339			
Gender	1	0.4627	0.4627	0.59	0.4449
Education	3	3.3768	1.1256	1.43	0.2371
Gender by Education	3	6.7941	2.2647	2.87	0.0384
Error	150	118.2937	0.7886		

by the college environment the student has chosen. For example, although more African Americans attend predominately White universities, graduation rates are higher at HBCUs (Kemp, 1990). Further, students attending HBCUs are likely to experience a more supportive social and cultural environment (DeSousa & Kuh). This type of environment promotes the development of the individual and creates feelings of connect- edness with the institution (Kemp; Lucas).

The purpose of this study was to (a) describe the most important mate selection characteristics for African American students at an HBCU and (b) explain how the interaction of gender and grade level (freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior) in college may influence students' choice of 22 mate selection characteristics. Given that mate selection is an important aspect of the social and academic life on college campuses, and may be an important predictor of marital stability, counselors and college personnel need to be aware of how different life experiences may impact African American college students' relationship variables. Further, because college personnel are concerned with creating a holistic environment for all students (DeSousa & Kuh, 1996), knowl- edge that contributes to understanding mate selection may lead to programs that foster better social relationships, particularly among African Americans.

METHOD

Participants

The participants were 166 African American

undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in English classes at an HBCU in the Southeast. An HBCU was selected because the student popu- lation was likely to be composed of large numbers of African American men and women. The sample consisted of 55 men and 111 women. A total of 212 questionnaires were returned and 19 were dropped because the respondents were not African American. Twenty-seven of the respon- dents were eliminated due to incomplete data. The students ranged in age from 17 to 38, with a mean age of 21. With regard to educational level, the students reported as follows: freshmen (40.4%), sophomores (24.4%), juniors (21.8%), and seniors (9.3%), and graduate students (4.1%). Given the small number of subjects in each cell, seniors and graduate students were collapsed into one category.

Instrument

The questionnaire consisted of 11 demographic items, 10 questions about love and sex, and 22 mate-selection items. Students were asked to rate the 22 characteristics according to their im- portance in the selection of a marriage partner (See Appendix). The 22 items consisted of Hill's (1945) list of 18 characteristics, and *athletic* and *sensitive* as suggested by Allgeier (1990). The author also added *same race* and *good sex* to the list of characteristics. A 7-point Likert-type scale used ratings ranging from 1 = *extremely unim- portant* to 7 = *extremely important*. For the purpose of this study, only the 22 mate-selection items were analyzed. Findings for the demographic and love and sex portions were analyzed separ-

ately and published as another manuscript (Parmer & Tam, 1992).

Procedure

A total of 300 questionnaires were distributed to students in various required English classes. This was the best way to reach large numbers of students in this nonrandom study. Instructors and a student worker distributed questionnaires to those students who, following an introduction, chose to participate. The questionnaires were distributed at the end of the class session; the student worker collected the completed questionnaires and was also available to answer questions. The questionnaire took approximately 10 minutes to complete.

RESULTS

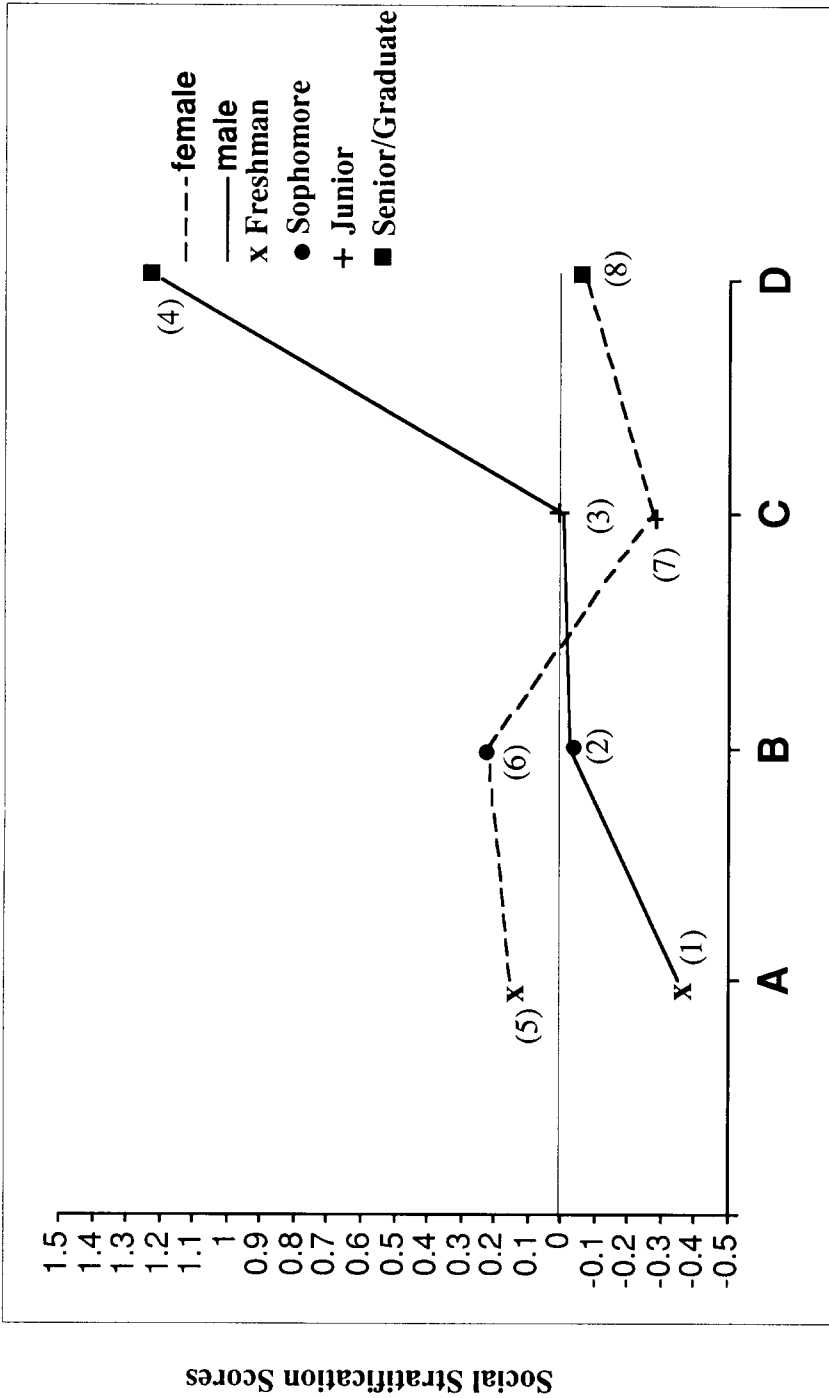
For the purpose of this study, 21 of the 22 items were factor analyzed. One item (education/intelligence) was dropped because many students failed to respond (the response line was inadvertently omitted). Based on the size of the Eigen values, the analysis yielded three factors that were labeled as: Social Stratification, Personality, and Physical scores. The first factor score, Social Stratification, loaded heavily on favorable social status, good financial prospects, similar religious and educational background, and similar political background. The second factor score, Personality, loaded heavily on dependable character, mutual attraction, refinement/neatness, pleasing disposition, emotional stability, desire

for home and children, good health, sensitivity, and ambition/industriousness. The third factor score, Physical Characteristics, involved good health, chastity, good sex, good looks, same race, athletic, sociability, and good cook. The three factors accounted for 90% of the variance in the 21 mate selection characteristics.

Using the factor scores, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to determine if gender and college grade level accounted for variability. Regarding the first factor score, Social Stratification, an interaction was observed between gender and education at $p < .05$, ($F = 2.87$, $p < 0.03$) (Table 1). Thus, the effect of college grade level on social stratification depends on the individual's gender, and the effect of gender on social stratification scores depends on educational level. The interaction was such that if the student's educational level was freshman or sophomore, then women considered social stratification to be more important, whereas if the student was a junior, senior, or graduate, then men considered social stratification to be more important. Figure 1 illustrates this interaction. The ANOVA results showed no significant differences in the Personality factor scores by gender and grade level. Thus, grade level and gender did not account for significant amounts of variability in Personality factor scores. The ANOVA revealed no significant effect of education for the Physical Characteristics factor scores at $p < .05$, ($F = 1.06$, $p < 0.37$), but a significant effect for gender was observed ($F = 8.26$, $p < 0.005$), for men ($M = 0.47$, $SE = 0.19$) and for women ($M = -0.15$, $SE = 0.09$)

TABLE 2.
Analysis of Variance for Physical Characteristics

Source	df	Sums of Square	Mean Square	F	Pr > F
Total	157	139.7907			
Gender	1	7.1453	7.1453	8.26	0.0046
Education	3	2.7646	0.9215	1.06	0.3659
Gender by Education	3	5.0229	1.6743	1.93	0.1264
Error	150	129.8003	0.8653		



Note: Higher scores indicate greater importance

FIGURE 1.
 Interaction of Gender and Education for Social Stratification Scores

(Table 2). Thus, if the student was male, then physical factors were more important than for females.

DISCUSSION

Although the results of this study have limited generalizability due to the small, purposive sample drawn from only one HBCU, results are not entirely consistent with previous studies conducted in a variety of settings and across several decades. Research has consistently reported that Social Stratification variables (social status, good financial prospects, similar religious and educational background, and similar political background) are more important to women than to men (Allgeier & Wiederman, 1991; Buss, 1989; Surra, 1990), but among the African American women in this study, these variables were significant only for freshmen and sophomore women. Among the men, Social Stratification variables were significant for juniors, seniors, and graduate students. These results invite interesting interpretations, particularly with regard to African American men and women in their freshman and sophomore years at college. These results have implications for economic realities in the African American community. One possible interpretation is that over time and as the students approach the completion of their college careers, the salience of the Social Stratification variables change, but in different directions. Social Stratification variables appear to become more important for African American men, even as they become less salient for African American women. Quite possibly a learning curve exists for African American women who go to college with the traditional expectation of finding a mate but who later find that the pool of "eligibles" has either shrunk or never existed. African American women may also be socialized to be independent, given that they have typically worked outside of the home (Staples, 1985).

The lack of significance for the upper-level women may indicate that they have come to accept the realities of the "marriage squeeze" (Glick, 1988) and no longer expect to select a mate based on Social Stratification variables. Upper-level women may be willing to compromise with

regard to their expectations, perhaps settling for more primary needs such as love and emotional closeness in relationships (Craig-Bray, Adams, & Dobson, 1988; Oggins, Lever, & Veroff, 1993; Parmer & Tam, 1992). In addition, African American women are perhaps willing to compromise or trade off some degree of economic security in favor of having their emotional needs fulfilled (Staples, 1988; Tucker & Taylor, 1989). The finding for the African American men in this sample with regard to Social Stratification variables is inconsistent with previous studies that report this element of mate selection as less important to men than to women. This result may suggest that African American men continue to experience economic insecurity in American society.

With regard to the Personality scores (dependable character, mutual attraction, refinement/neatness, emotional stability, pleasing disposition, desire for home and children, good health, sensitivity, ambition/industriousness, etc.), gender and grade level were not significant. In the current study, findings suggest that Personality variables are equally important for both men and women. However, this finding is inconsistent with previous studies (Allgeier & Wiederman, 1991; Hudson & Henze, 1969). Previous studies conducted with Whites have shown that Personality variables such as industriousness (a characteristic women desired in men) and dependable character were extremely important as mate selection characteristics. Klimek (1979) noted that "partner selection and marriage were not mysterious or blind events at all, but an intricate network of human needs attempting to be mutually satisfied by the unconscious needs and conscious desire of each partner" (p. viii). This group of African American college students may not realize the impact of personality characteristics on relationships. Thus, it may be important to assist African American college students in understanding the significance of variables such as personality as an influence upon relationships and the selection of a partner. This becomes even more significant when considering the psychological adjust that African Americans must make in a color-conscious society, when dealing with the consequences of racism and oppression (Feagin & Sikes, 1994).

That African American men favored Physical Characteristics (good health, chastity, good sex, good looks, same race, athletic, sociability, and good cook) more than women did in this sample is consistent with previous studies (Allgeier & Wiederman, 1991; Hudson & Henze, 1969). Although men consistently hold traditional physical mate-selection values, cultural differences are believed to exist for African American men based on physical characteristics such as good looks. Although physical attractiveness was not explored in this study, the topic deserves further study given that limited information is available about what specific factors are important to African Americans (Buss & Barnes, 1986; Ponzo, 1985). Historically, members of the African American community have demonstrated concern for physical attractiveness associated with hair texture, skin color, body build, and facial features (Himes, 1949). Men have placed a greater value on White aesthetic values in regard to the notion of physical attractiveness (Buss, 1989; Ponzo). However, since the "Black is Beautiful" movement of the 1960s and the 1970s, African Americans who value White standards of physical attractiveness are likely to be perceived as lacking a Black consciousness (Sanders et al., 1995). Although often unspoken, physical attractiveness continues to be important as a standard of beauty. For example, Sanders et al. found that 30% of preadolescent urban African American girls desired lighter skin color or complexion for themselves. Other studies about physical-related variables have shown that African American college students consider love as an important component in a satisfying sexual relationship (Parmer & Tam, 1992) and are aware of the continued social pressure to marry within one's race (Bethea, 1995; Hinde, 1979).

CONCLUSION

Mate selection is an important variable in forming relationships, yet little is known about the important preferred partner characteristics and their significance for African Americans. Due to limitations, the current findings must be considered only a beginning in examining mate selection characteristics among African Ameri-

cans. The composition of the sample from only one HBCU limits generalization. Generalizations may be possible if future research replicated the current study at other HBCUs, or even with African American samples taken from predominately White institutions. Further, the questionnaire used in this study may have lacked the necessary reliability or validity to measure the unique relationship variables in this African American population.

The range of the variables involved in the process of choosing a mate is contingent upon any number of circumstances (Tucker, Mitchell-Kernan, 1995). Surra (1990) noted that social structure, psychological, and economic variables are important factors in mate selection. Additional research must be undertaken to assess how these variables impact upon relationships and marriage for African Americans. For example, in the current study, Social Stratification variables were not significant for junior- and senior-level African American women. This finding is not consistent with past research and suggests further analysis may be needed (Allgeier & Wiederman, 1991). In addition, future research must explore career- and work-related variables as causality for the disruption in intimate and marital relationships (Cazenave, 1983; Chimezie, 1985; Parker et al., 1984). Lucas (1993), in her study of minority college students, reported that students were in need of career information and felt that they lacked career decision-making skills. Studying the career choices and work behaviors of African Americans would provide insight to better address the fact that college-educated African American men continue to be unemployed and underemployed (Staples, 1985).

Research must not only examine in greater depth, the characteristics addressed in this study, but also must explore how mate selection differs by age, gender (Buss, 1986), reproductive capacity (Buss, 1989), career goals (Staples, 1988), and desire for a romantic relationship (Davenport & Yurich, 1991). Extending previous research would involve developing appropriate measures that would assess critical variables beyond the scope of the current questionnaire. In the university community, research initiatives could be created that encourage faculty to become involved in

studying the personal development of students. Research could be expanded beyond the confines of HBCUs to predominately White universities where African American students are likely to feel less supported (DeSousa & Kuh, 1996). Data from exit interviews could also be used to measure the degree to which students have felt supported and embraced in their out-of-classroom activities.

In practice, universities are charged with creating a holistic learning environment that supports the social, cultural, and academic potential of a diverse student body. A holistic environment has important implications for recruitment and retention of African Americans. A campus ethos that affirms rather than alienates, by infusion into all aspects of the students life, supports learning and development (Kuh, 1993). A major factor in affirming the college student is through his or her peer group (Astin, 1993). This is an especially important link to African American students because they have a tendency to group-identify and cluster together, especially at predominately White universities. A caring university would examine the attraction to the peer group by African Americans and attempt to cultivate this experience in university-sponsored social and academic activities such as study groups.

Interventions must be designed to improve the responsiveness of student services professionals to African American students. This process involves a committed staff that is willing to engage the African American campus community by way of technology (Internet, E-mail, Web page) or other means of communication. A responsive environment can reach African American students in a variety of ways. First, on

campuses with a Black cultural center, Black faculty and staff could be invited to interact with students on an ongoing basis. Same- gender and cross-gender dialogue could be conducted on the subject of relationship variables such as love and sex on campus, communication with a partner, or functional and dysfunctional marriages and their correlation to mate selection. Second, freshman orientation would be a suitable time to teach students about issues in Black male-female relationships within a campus environment and to explore personal requirements for a mate. Although this type of workshop is essential for all incoming freshmen, students at all levels would benefit from ongoing workshops. This could also be accomplished through "brown-bag" seminars where faculty, administrators, and students converse with invited speakers. In addition, counseling centers and dormitories could sponsor workshops and forums that allow men and women to discuss pertinent mate selection issues. Parenthetically, Staples (1981) noted that relationships between Black men and women are one of the more popular topics at Black professional meetings. Thus, the effective practice of education demands that student affairs practitioners think about how experiences in college will impact long-term relationships. As Parker et al. (1984) noted, the hope for strong African American families is in part contingent upon college students.

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APPENDIX.

22 Marriage Partner Characteristics

Dependable character	Good health
Mutual attraction	Similar political background
Education/intelligence	Ambition/industriousness
Similar education background	Pleasing disposition
Desire for home/children	Sexual chastity
Favorable social status	Good financial prospects
Emotional stability	Sociability
Refinement/neatness	Good housekeeper
Similar religious background	Good looks
*Athletic	*Sensitivity
*Good sex	*Same race

* Characteristics added for the current study.