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Conventions of Courtship: Gender and Race Differences in the Significance of Dating Rituals

Pamela Braboy Jackson,
Indiana University

Sibyl Kleiner,
Indiana University

Claudia Geist, and
University of Utah

Kara Cebulko
Providence College

Abstract

Dating rituals include dating-courtship methods that are regularly enacted. We explored gender and race differences in the relative importance placed on certain symbolic activities previously identified by the dating literature as constituting such rituals. Using information collected from a racially diverse sample of college students ($N = 680$), we find that some traditional gender differences persist, but that these are also cross-cut by racial contrasts. Men, overall, place more emphasis on gifting, as well as sexual activity. Gender differences, however, are significantly greater among African Americans¹ as compared to Whites in our sample. African American respondents are also significantly more likely than White respondents to associate meeting the family with a more serious dating relationship. Our findings highlight the need for greater efforts to uncover and account for racial differences in dating, relationships, and courtship.

Keywords

dating; courtship; rituals; race; gender

American courtship has been systematically studied by social scientists since the 1930's, demonstrating clear changes in the language and forms of courtship. Nonetheless, courtship has always been placed at one end of a continuum, with a permanent partnership (traditionally marriage) as the ultimate goal (Bailey, 1989). We define "dating" as a form of courtship, in that it encompasses social activities between two people assessing the possibility of deepening the relationship over time. Such relationship progressions may take the form of loosely defined stages not marked by deliberate decisions, but by various actions taken by the couple (e.g., Manning & Smock, 2005). Thus, dating can be viewed as a ritual activity, entailing multiple actions with underlying symbolic meaning, repeated over time in various forms as the relationship progresses in seriousness (Baxter & Bullis, 1986), or breaks off (King & Christensen, 1983). Dating rituals include a variety of symbolic activities communicating attraction to the other person, potentially signifying relationship status and

¹The term African American is used interchangeably with the term Black in this manuscript.

Direct correspondence to: Pamela Braboy Jackson, Department of Sociology, Indiana University, Ballantine Hall – 744, Bloomington, IN 47405 or pjackson@indiana.edu.
Contact numbers: 812-855-2540 (office), 812-855-0781 (department fax)

expectations (Greer & Buss, 1994; Hendrick, Hendrick, & Adler, 1988). In this study we examine perceptions of a range of potential relationship markers. We believe there is still much to learn about courtship practices, particularly the extent to which anticipated practices may differ not only by gender but also by race.

According to a symbolic interactionist frame, symbols (which may involve words, objects, and/or gestures) become an abstract representation of something else (Sandstrom, Martin, & Fine, 2006). In the case of dating, activities constituting rituals may represent shared meaning between partners, or potential partners, by symbolizing the level of seriousness in the relationship, or a partner's desire to continue, or deepen, the relationship. The absence of a known ritual may mark the relationship as having failed to reach a certain level of commitment. Alternatively, different interpretations of dating rituals may lead to misunderstandings, hurt feelings, or resentment towards members of the opposite sex (LaGreca & Harrison, 2005).

Family scholars have long argued that the study of dating deserves more attention (Klemer, 1971), as dating is an important part of the life course at any age and often a precursor to marriage (Levesque & Caron, 2004). There are several areas of research that explore dating attitudes and behaviors. Research in the scripting approach, for example, views flexible yet normative "scripts" as multi-level guides for behavior, examines what individuals believe constitutes a first "date" (Klinkenberg & Rose, 1994; Laner & Ventrone, 2000), definitions of a good or bad date (Alksnis, Desmaris & Wood 1996), and appropriate sexual attitudes on a date (Bartoli & Clark 2006). In another vein, the public eye and much recent scholarly literature on dating has turned primarily to the sexual experiences of heterosexual college students, arguing that pathways to dating and serious relationships are becoming more diverse and less formal (Gilmartin, 2005; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009). We suggest that some basic questions regarding group differences in the symbolic *meaning* of dating elements have yet to be examined.

The central research questions we seek to answer with this study are whether and how the significance of particular dating rituals are patterned by gender and race simultaneously. We use a racially diverse data set of traditional-aged college students from a variety of college contexts. Understanding gender and racial differences in the assessment of dating rituals helps us explore the extent to which relationship activities are given similar importance across institutional and cultural lines. Most of the studies that inform our knowledge of dating and relationships are unable to draw conclusions regarding racial differences because the sample is Caucasian (e.g., Bogle, 2008), or primarily so (e.g., Manning & Smock 2005). Race has been recently argued to be an often-overlooked variable in studies examining social psychological processes, due to the prevalence of sample limitations as well as habitual oversight in the literature (Hunt, Jackson, Powell & Steelman 2000). Additionally, a failure to examine both gender and race prevents assessment of whether gendered beliefs are shared across groups. Gauging the extent of differences in beliefs among different population subgroups is critical to advancing the study of relationship dynamics (see Weaver & Ganong, 2004).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Studies of adolescent dating have clearly demonstrated that it is often peer-supervised and governed by a set of rules (Cate & Lloyd, 1992; Knox & Wilson, 1981; Waller, 1937). The dating system began as early as the 1920s and was primarily designed by the White middle-class (see Bailey, 1989; Modell, 1989 and Cate & Lloyd, 1992). Unlike their White counterparts, an elaborate dating system did not develop for African-Americans during this time period. Most opposite sex relations occurred in large mixed-age settings. In fact, while

Whites were dating in their youth, many urban African Americans were getting married (Modell, 1989). An impressive body of research indicates a marked change in dating patterns among both racial groups since that time. In the mid-1960's and into the 1970's, formal dating became less important as adolescents started spending more time with peer groups (Bogle, 2008; Modell, 1989). However, the literature also suggests that dating patterns for African-Americans were strongly affected by segregation and desegregation, with the former preventing and the latter facilitating greater similarity to Whites (Dickinson, 1975).

Historically, heterosexual dating has taken two primary forms: traditional dating and getting together (Coleman, 1988). Traditional dating is more gendered and very formal—the male initiates the date while the female waits to be called. Some of the activities that might occur on such a date include dressing up to go out to dinner, going to the movies or theater, and giving or receiving gifts. The rules of the traditional dating system place men in control of the date and women in the position of paying off the date with physical intimacy (Belk & Coon, 1993). This pattern has been criticized for perpetuating the double standard for women, the sexual exploitation of women, and the economic exploitation of men (Bailey, 1989).

Getting together, on the other hand, is less overtly tied to exploitive gender roles. It involves more informal practices such as meeting with a group of friends to listen to music, play sports, or hang out. If a specific couple finds that they are attracted to each other, they may form a pair. These group activities can serve as a screening device for people who are attracted to each other but wish to get better acquainted before deciding whether to continue or terminate the relationship (Coleman, 1988). Thus, forming within the context of getting together is casual dating. These relationships are characterized by less commitment as well as less frequent encounters than more serious relationships (e.g. Sherwin and Corbett 1985).

A recently labeled variant on casual dating is “hooking up.” Hookups generally refer to situations where there is an exchange of sexual favors such as kissing, fondling, or intercourse, without any promise of future commitment (Bogle, 2008; Paul & Hayes, 2002; Paul, McManus, & Hayes, 2000). This may include a one-night stand, casual sex, or friendships that include a sexual component. This behavior is especially prevalent on college campuses where the reality of delayed marriage corresponds with independent living arrangements (Bogle, 2008). Among our group of college students, approximately 39% said they had sexual relations with someone they did not consider to be a significant other – a slightly higher percentage than was found in the study by Paul et al. (2000) where 30.4% of her sample of White college students said they had engaged in coital hook-ups. Of course, hookups, like “getting together,” may lead to a more serious relationship and are currently considered a common courtship route - carrying far less stigma than in the past (Lambert, Kahn, & Apple, 2003). Hook-ups, however, are but one ritual that may or may not signify to an individual that they are on a path to a serious relationship. We view our study as an extension of research on the culture of courtship among college students and include among those rituals, sexual intimacy.

This study takes a broad approach to dating rituals, focusing on activities that have been identified within the domains of both traditional dating and getting together. Instead of asking what constitutes a dating event, or what to look for in a dating partner, we pose a more introspective question regarding the significance people assign to particular activities. The meaning of rituals taps into relationship dynamics and how relationship interactions may be judged as becoming more serious. We consider rituals included in the dating literature, such as sexual intimacy, gifting, and family interactions, as potential markers of

relationship seriousness. In the next section we elaborate on these particular rituals since they have received the most attention by social scientists.

Sexual intimacy may be viewed as a marker of relationship seriousness. In certain eras, premarital intercourse was condoned only if the couple was engaged. “Going steady” was clearly demarcated by activities such as kissing or a vow towards monogamy (Bailey 1989; Christopher & Sprecher, 2000). Some investigators continue to define romantic involvement in terms of activities such as holding hands, kissing, or verbally expressing like or love (Joyner & Udry, 2000). While attitudes towards premarital sex have become more permissive since the 1970’s (Bogle 2008), the majority of U.S. adults contend that premarital sex is still wrong at some level (Petersen & Donnenwerth, 1997).

College women appear to have more restrictive attitudes towards sexual intimacy than their male counterparts (Knox, Sturdivant & Zusman, 2001), are expected to limit sex in dating encounters (Bartoli & Clark, 2006), and often view emotional involvement as a prerequisite to sexual intimacy (Cohen & Shotland, 1996). Although men are more likely than women to engage in casual sex (Clark, 1990; Maticka-Tyndale, Herold, & Opperman, 2003; Oliver & Hyde, 1993), women who have less traditional gender role values are more likely to engage in sexual intercourse and view sexual intimacy as part of the dating process (Peplau, Rubin & Hill, 1977).² Thus, we may find few differences between men and women in the relative importance placed on sexual intimacy since the focus here is on college adults who are often exploring their sexuality (Paul et al., 2000). On the other hand, the findings may be consistent with recent work demonstrating a higher expectation of physical intimacy on the part of men, especially since female college students are viewed more harshly when they engage in “promiscuous” sexual behavior compared to their male counterparts (Bogle, 2008; Knox et al., 2001; Phillips, 2000). In general, the literature on social scripts suggests that men and women take different attitudes toward sex in the dating context (Alksnis et al., 1996). In our study we extend this type of research by exploring differences in the endorsement of sexual intimacy as symbolic of a boy/girlfriend relationship within and across racial groups.³

Gift exchange is another ritual found within dating relationships (Bailey, 1989). The study of gift exchange originates in early anthropological research by Malinowski (1922) and Levi-Strauss (1969) who argued that exchanging gifts aids in the development and continuity of society and culture. This perspective later inspired a more social psychological approach. For example, Gouldner (1960) made a distinction between the norm of reciprocity in gift exchange (i.e., whereby there is an expectation of exchange) and the altruistic norm (i.e., there is no expectation of return). Not surprisingly, the study of gift-giving was dominated by the social exchange paradigm with some scholars viewing this activity as instrumental exchange (gift-giving accompanied by an expectation of reciprocity).

Studies view gift giving among couples as both reciprocal and altruistic exchange. For example, Belk and Coon (1993) found that gifting in dating relationships is initially characterized by expectations of sexual returns among men and financial returns among women, but there is also some evidence of shifts from an instrumental exchange toward an expressive love model, where gifts begin to take on social (not just economic) value to both parties as the relationship develops (Belk & Coon, 1993). Despite an increase in gender role egalitarian attitudes among adults in the United States (see Gibbons, Hamby, & Dennis,

²There remains debate regarding gender disparities and self-response bias in the actual number of sexual partners, with some investigators demonstrating that within-couple analysis (Harvey et al, 2004) or consideration for contact with (or as) prostitutes in national samples (Brewer et al., 2000) may account for this discrepancy.

³The approach we are taking assumes racial endogamy. Research suggests that the majority of adults date within their race typically because they assume they have more in common with those who look like them (Kalmijn, 1998).

1997; Twenge, 2006), women continue to view themselves as recipients of gifts rather than as gift-givers (Areni, Kiecker, & Palan, 1998; Greer & Buss, 1994), and gift giving seems more salient for men than women (Areni et al., 1998). Research on college students suggests that men use gifts as symbolic gestures to accelerate sexual encounters with women (Greer & Buss, 1994).

In this study, we inquire about gift giving, receiving gifts, and the relative costs of gifts given (whether they are affordable or expensive). We pay particular attention to the role of gender in assessments of gifting rituals that may characterize a boy/girlfriend relationship. Gift exchange may continue to follow the traditional pattern where men attach more significance to purchasing gifts and women place greater importance on receiving gifts. Less is known about gifting among African Americans; therefore, this study fills a gap in the gifting literature by exploring racial differences in the role of gifts in considering another as a boy/girlfriend.

Another potential dating ritual is meeting the family. In her historical work on American courtship practices, Bailey (1989) describes the late nineteenth century form of “calling.” Here, a mother decided to accept (or reject) the “call” of a young man interested in her daughter. As this system would dictate, the mother chaperoned her daughter and “caller” on the initial date. With changes in the historical context in which courtship occurred, came the removal of parental oversight (Bailey, 1989; Bogle, 2008). In fact, college students often seek to *conceal* relationships from parents (Baxter & Widenmann 1993) even though kinship bonds are an important component of most family relationships (Hogan, Eggebeen, & Clogg, 1993). When dating relationships grow serious, college students may be more likely to discuss them with their parents and try to affect their parents’ views (Leslie, Huston & Johnson, 1986). Introducing a partner to one’s parents may thus be associated with greater relationship commitment (Baxter & Bullis, 1986).

There is little empirical attention paid to race and the role of family in the dating behavior of college students (one notable exception is Knox & Wilson, 1981). Yet an important predictor of happiness among African Americans is closeness to family rather than to friends (Ellison, 1990). Our study inquires about the importance of actually being introduced to (and introducing) the family. We build on Knox and Wilson’s (1981) examination of gender differences among African Americans by assessing both gender and racial differences in the extent to which family may be used in the courtship process when naming someone as a boy/girlfriend. More broadly, we argue that the family remains an important part of this process even though young adults are physically removed from their parents’ household. We consider meeting one’s family, or the family of a dating partner, as a potential dating ritual, and we ask whether this is an indicator of a more serious relationship more among women than men, and African Americans than Whites.

In sum, we treat rituals as systems of established symbolic actions that stand apart from everyday actions. When individuals enact rituals, they create meaningful and recognizable social bonds, as well as perpetuate social norms, maintain the existence of the rituals themselves, and create the possibility for certain future interactions or relationships to occur (Etzioni, 2000). We believe that knowledge concerning dating rituals, therefore, can further inform the study of courtship by illuminating the personal meaning people assign to these behavioral symbols. Through dating rituals, relationships may become labeled as serious, potentially leading to committed partnership or marriage (Coleman, 1988). Thus, we believe this study is relevant for building on the body of research in the area of interpersonal relationships. We address the following questions: (1) Which dating rituals are most commonly considered markers of a boy/girlfriend relationship among young adults? (2)

How do these relative rankings differ by gender and race, taking into account other personal characteristics?

DATA, MEASURES, AND ANALYTIC STRATEGY

This study uses data from a self-administered survey of young adults enrolled in three universities located in the Southeast. We sampled students at two public universities, one whose student populations were predominantly White and the other, predominantly African American. The third was a private, predominantly White institution. A list of classes being offered during that semester was compiled and ten classes (across disciplines and colleges) were randomly selected from the list for each institution. Instructors from the class were contacted and asked if the investigator could use a class hour to distribute the survey.⁴ Approximately 75% of the thirty instructors agreed to allow the primary investigator to conduct the study during a class session.

Participation in the study was voluntary, and the initial sample consisted of 480 females and 380 males.⁵ The sample included 20.4% freshmen, 28.9% sophomores, 29.1% juniors, and 20.7% seniors. Approximately 49.8% of the sample self-identified as White, 42.6% as African American, 4.4% as Asian American, 2.0% as Hispanic/Latino, and 1.2% Native American. Respondents were given the opportunity to write-in a racial designation not indicated on the list of options (noted above). We utilize information on those students who self-identified as White or African American and who were traditional-aged students (aged 17–22 at the time of the survey), since they comprise the majority of the sample (N=680) and allow for the strongest race/ethnic comparisons.⁶

Survey questions about dating rituals were preceded by the following statement: “Dating rituals take several forms. What activities would have to occur before you consider a person your boy/girlfriend?” Respondents were able to select from nine symbolic gestures: (1) attend social activities (e.g., movies, athletic events), (2) hang out with other person’s friends, (3) sexual intimacy, (4) meet my family, (5) meet his/her family, (6) dress up and go out, (7) buy affordable gifts, (8) buy expensive gifts, and (9) receive expensive gifts.⁷ Respondents were not explicitly prompted to base their responses solely on their personal ideal or on personal relationships. As a result, it is likely that the responses represent a mixture of cultural ideals and actual experiences. Neither were respondents prompted to think about homosexual or heterosexual relationships in response to this question. We, therefore, are unable to examine dating rituals across groups that may have differing sexual orientations.

Our primary variables of interest are gender (coded “1” if female and “0” if male) and race (coded “1” if African American and “0” if White). Other sociodemographic characteristics have been shown to impact a variety of relationship attitudes and behavior. For example, age, family structure, and having older siblings have all been shown to be significantly

⁴The principal investigator was required to have a faculty sponsor at each institution to ensure compliance to Human Subjects protocol at each university. The faculty sponsor also assisted in securing permission for the study from their colleagues at their institution, which resulted in a high response rate.

⁵Approximately 95% of students enrolled in sampled classes completed the questionnaire. After signing an informed consent form, respondents were given a self-report questionnaire during the class session and were spaced far enough apart to maximize chances of complete privacy. The questionnaire took an average of 40 minutes to complete.

⁶The results did not change when the older students were included in the sample. We restrict the sample in this way, however, to reduce the chances of including older adults who are not part of this particular generation of college students.

⁷This set of rituals was derived from a pretest. In addition, the final questionnaire allowed respondents to write in another activity not included in the nine rituals listed. 133 respondents took advantage of this option. Two respondents suggested going to church as a gesture/activity, 17 wrote that they needed to be “friends first,” 30 indicated that they would first discuss the relationship, and 34 suggested “spending lots of time.” The largest category was “spiritual intimacy, deep conversations” as an activity that would have to occur before considering someone a boy/girlfriend. This corresponds to about 8% of respondents (50 people).

related to first timing and frequency of sexual intercourse (see Whitbeck, Simons, & Khao, 1994 for a review). We incorporate these and other factors into our models to account for each student's background and family characteristics. The age of the respondent is coded in years. Religiosity is assessed by the question "how religious are you" (1 = not at all religious to 5 = very religious).

While the data do not include a detailed relationship history, respondents were given an extensive life events index. They were asked to indicate whether they had experienced a particular event over the course of their college careers. For this study we consider whether a respondent fell in love, started dating, or broke up with a boy/girlfriend (since starting college). Respondents who said they had experienced one or more of these events were assigned a value of "1" indicating some college dating experience while those who indicated none of these events were assigned a value of "0" representing no college dating experience.

To assess social class, we rely on two indicators. For the first, respondents were asked "based on the household that you lived in, what is your social class standing" with the categories being 1 = lower class, 2 = working class, 3 = lower-middle class, 4 = upper-middle class, 5 = upper class, and 6 = elite or wealthy. This measure is often referred to as subjective social status and has been shown to be as important a predictor of social phenomenon among adolescents as objective measures of social class (see Finkelstein, Kubzansky, & Goodman, 2006). Nonetheless, we also include an objective indicator of social class using father's education (if no data on the father is available, the mother's education is used as a substitute indicator). Parental education takes on the value of 0 for no college degree and 1 for a college degree.

We further include controls for family structure and closeness to parents. Two measures address respondents' family structure. The first measures whether or not the respondent grew up with two parents. Students were asked: "Would you say by age 16, you had been raised in a one-parent or two-parent household?" The first household structure measure is coded 0 for those who grew up in one-parent households, and 1 for those who were raised in two-parent households. The second measure assesses number of siblings where students were asked to indicate their total number of siblings. To evaluate closeness with parents, respondents were asked to indicate how close they feel to their parents.⁸ The value of 1 indicates that they feel very close, 0 indicates everything else. Table 1 displays basic descriptive statistics for the independent variables and the controls (See appendix 1 for the distribution of the social class and religiosity variables by race).

Our analysis proceeds in two major steps. Since little is known about racial differences in the dating process, and even less is known about the intersection of gender and race in dating situations, we begin by providing descriptive evidence about the types of dating rituals that are indicated as markers of being in a boyfriend/girlfriend relationship. Where possible, we include a differentiation by gender and/or race, and test for significant differences between groups.

In a second step, we perform multivariate analyses to understand gender and racial differences in the selection of specific dating rituals. To accomplish this, we estimate logistic regressions models that include our key variables of interest (gender and race) as well as the aforementioned control variables. To assess both the gender differences within each racial group, as well as the racial differences among men and women, we estimate a series of logistic regressions for each of the dating rituals comparing the four subgroups.⁸

⁸This question refers to emotional closeness. Unfortunately we do not have information on the geographical distance of the students from their parents.

RESULTS

Table 2 shows the percentage of the total sample, as well as the sample by gender and race, stating that certain ritual activities must occur before considering someone their boy/girlfriend. As shown here, the most commonly cited activity for the total sample is attending social activities together (92.65%),⁹ while the least cited is buying the other person expensive gifts (20.88%). Less than 50% of the sample report that gifting, or sexual intimacy, must occur prior to considering someone a boy/girlfriend. In fact, less than 35% of the sample report any type of gift exchange as an indication that they are involved with a boy/girlfriend. Thus, young adults seem to be making a distinction between rituals deemed important signifiers of relationships with boy/girlfriends, and those that are more commonly found across other types of relationships. Since attending social activities together is the most prevalent dating ritual for all groups, and is nearly equally prevalent across groups, our attention below will be focused on differences among the remaining rituals.

In terms of gender, we find both similarities and differences in the set of rituals cited as informing respondents that “the other” is a boy/girlfriend. For women as well as men, meeting the family (58.3% and 55.3% respectively), and dressing up and going out (54.4% and 54.6% respectively) appear to be especially salient cues that they are involved with someone they would name as a boy/girlfriend. Sexual intimacy is a more salient cue for men (57%) than for women (41.6%), while women more commonly cite hanging out (71.3%) compared to men (63.3%). As suggested by the literature on gifting behavior, all forms of gift exchange are endorsed as an important ritual by a significantly higher percentage of men than women, although both men and women less commonly include gifting in their overall list of rituals (ranked last among the rituals).

When the sample is divided by race, we find that meeting the individual’s family (own or other’s) is significantly more important for African Americans (at 72.2%) than Whites (at 45.8%). In fact, apart from attending social activities, which was most commonly chosen “ritual” in all groups, meeting family is the most frequently cited indicator of a boy/girlfriend relationship among African Americans. It ranks higher (2nd for African Americans) than hanging out with the other person’s friends (ranked 2nd for Whites). We also find that a somewhat higher percentage of Whites regard sexual intimacy as a symbolic dating ritual compared to African Americans (51.2% vs. 44.3%), and a lower proportion of Whites indicate giving or receiving gifts as expected rituals. Remarkably, we find just as many significant substantive differences across race (family, hanging out, and gifting) as we do across gender (sex, hanging out, and gifting).

To better examine potential areas of conflict among those who may be involved in a relationship with someone within their own race (endogamy), we explore gender responses within each racial category. As shown in Table 3, we find that among African American college students, sexual intimacy seems to be a more salient gesture for men compared to women. Women, on the other hand, seem to place more emphasis on hanging out with the other person’s friends as a potential symbol of a serious relationship. For the African American sample, there are no significant gender differences in the importance placed on family, and only with respect to buying expensive gifts do gender differences in the importance of gifting emerge.

⁸We are interested in four contrasts: Black women vs. Black men, White women vs. White men, Black women vs. White women, and Black men vs. White men. We estimate three models for each of the dating rituals to determine the differences in the odds of mentioning the specific ritual are significant. Full models are available upon request.

⁹Due to the skewed response on this question (over 90% for each group of young adults), we are unable to examine variation within a multivariate framework. However, we do explore the relationship between the covariates and the frequency at which respondents say that attending social activities is an indication of being in a serious relationship (Table 7 below).

The only significant gender differences among Whites exist with respect to gifting: men are more likely to mention all types of gifts compared to women. Among Whites, it appears that women are less likely than men to mention sexual intimacy but more likely to mention hanging out as a symbol of seeing a date as a boyfriend, but these differences fail to reach statistical significance.

We also examine the racial differences among men and women, as indicated by shaded areas in Table 3. There are clear racial differences for both men and women. Among men, hanging out with friends of a dating partner seems to be a more salient activity for Whites. Meeting the family and gifting seem more important for African American men compared to Whites, as well as African American women compared to Whites. For women, we find that sexual intimacy is considerably less relevant for African American women compared to White women. While these group differences are striking, we now proceed to multivariate analyses to examine whether or not these patterns remain stable when other sociodemographic factors are taken into account.

Even after including the host of control variables, we find that differences between the groups mirror those discussed previously. As illustrated in Table 4, our multivariate analyses confirm the aggregate gender differences reported earlier. Women are significantly more likely than men to say that hanging out with the other person's friends is a cue that the other person is a boy/girlfriend, and women are less likely than men to say that sexual intimacy or the exchange of gifts is an indication that the other person is a boy/girlfriend.

In terms of race, we find that African Americans are less likely than Whites to agree that hanging out with the other person's friends is an indication that the other person is a boy/girlfriend, but are more likely to state that meeting the family (on either side) and gift exchange (receiving expensive gifts and buying the other person affordable gifts) are dating rituals indicating that the person is a boy/girlfriend. These significant findings from the multivariate models are in line with the group differences described in Table 2.

To further investigate our earlier group comparisons, we next compare the four groups (African American women and men, White women and men) to each other. The group comparisons presented take into account all the control variables included in the previous multivariate analyses, although for ease of presentation these controls are not shown here.

Table 5 presents significant differences in odds ratios for the most important gender/racial comparisons. Dividing each racial group by gender, we find that African American women are much *less* likely than African American men to see sexual intimacy as an indicator of a more serious relationship, and we also find that African American women are *less* likely than African American men to link this relationship transition to buying expensive gifts. When comparing White women to White men, we also find that these women, too, are significantly less likely than white men to mention gift exchanges as a marker of a boyfriend/girlfriend relationship, yet we do not find gender differences in the role of sexual intimacy.

When we contrast the two racial groups within each gender, we find once again that African American women have almost three times the odds of mentioning meeting the family, and are also more likely to mention gift exchanges compared to White women. Further mirroring our descriptive findings are the results that indicate that African American men are less likely than White men to perceive hanging out with friends as an indication that their partner is a girlfriend, but they are more likely than White men to perceive sexual intimacy as such.

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SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In this study, we examine gender and race differences in the importance of dating rituals. We use a unique data set that gives us access to racially diverse data from college age respondents, for whom dating is often thought to be an important part of their lived experience. By assessing basic discrepancies in how dating rituals are interpreted within and between groups, we provide evidence for the existence of significant gender and racial differences as well as several specific directions for further exploration.

First, we find that the less gender-typed, more casual dating rituals (participating in social activities with peers or hanging out) are commonly anticipated as part of the pathway to a more serious relationship. We also find, however, that traditional gender differences associated with dating rituals persist across our college sample. Consistent with previous research, men tend to place more emphasis on gifting than women. Even across race, men were more likely than women to cite buying gifts as a marker of a serious relationship. Also, in keeping with the literature, we found that the men in our study were more likely than the women to consider sexual intimacy necessary when considering someone a boy/girlfriend. These patterns may suggest that college students' dating scripts are fairly traditional (Laner & Ventrone, 2000). Men's higher valuing of sex may reflect conformity with the norms of dominant masculinity (Oliver & Hyde, 1993) – physical intimacy being a necessary component to a relationship. Alternatively, men rating sexual intimacy as necessary to a serious relationship could reflect an overall higher value placed on sexual intimacy for its own sake and a slight devaluing of sexual intimacy as an *accurate* marker of relationship closeness. Indeed, no one in the study indicated that sexual intimacy, by itself, would mark the relationship as falling in the domain of boy/girlfriend (data not shown).

Second, race widened the gender gap in labeling sexual intimacy as an important relationship cue. The gender gap in intimacy ratings among African Americans is especially remarkable considering that, in the general population of adults, the overall rates of sexual activity for African Americans and Whites are very similar (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994). We found *more* African American men than any other group citing sexual intimacy as necessary to considering someone a boy/girlfriend, while *fewer* African American women than any other race-gender group reported sexual intimacy as a necessary consideration for this type of relationship. It may be that African American college men view sexual intimacy as an integral component of a serious relationship, while African American college women view sexual intimacy as relatively unnecessary for achieving a serious relationship.

This finding may also suggest the influence of a low sex ratio on college campuses, where African American women are disadvantaged by the presence of fewer “eligible” marriageable African American men (see Lichter et al, 1991, 1992). African American women may perceive that these men will take advantage of the low male-to-female sex ratio, either by moving on to another partner or retaining the freedom to pursue a different partner (see Youm & Paik 2004). Thus, women may rely less upon sexual activity as an indicator of relationship seriousness, because they know the “market” is over-saturated with potential female sex partners. Other dating rituals, such as those involving economic support (Bailey 1989; Bulcroft & Bulcroft, 1993) – i.e., gifting – may be considered better indicators of men's seriousness.

¹⁰The racial differences among men are only significant at the 0.05 level and should be interpreted with caution. Due to the number of contrasts estimated in our models (3 contrasts for each dating ritual), we are at greater risk of committing a type 1 error.

Finally, we found a notable racial difference in the importance placed on family by African Americans versus Whites. This finding held across gender comparisons. Becerra (1988) suggests that kinship bonds may be particularly important for ethnic minorities, and our evidence supports this view in terms of the family's role in the dating process. African American respondents were much more likely than Whites to report that meeting a person's family members, and a person meeting their own family members, were necessary before that person would be considered a boy/girlfriend. This finding also corroborates Giordano's (2003) claim that for African Americans, families are a more salient reference group than friends. For example, she found that African American youth spent more time with family and less time with friends than White youth. Our findings among college students suggest that racial differences between African Americans and Whites in terms of the role played by family may at least persist into the transition to adulthood.

This study reveals important gender and race differences in beliefs about the significance of various dating rituals, thus reemphasizing the importance of considering the idioculture of different groups (Sandstrom et al., 2006). We find that traditional gender roles pattern the activities one anticipates in connection with greater dating commitment. In terms of race differences, however, our results indicate that there are important differences between African Americans and Whites that have not been fully explored. Notably, our inclusion of a range of controls in our multivariate models did not affect these gender and race differences. Although we propose explanations for some of these differences, further study is needed to account for our findings. Qualitative research might explore racial differences in the meaning and enactment of dating rituals, and the ways that partners verbally and non-verbally communicate their attraction and hopes for the future. Both qualitative and quantitative research could also examine regional differences, and include rigorous tests of how class, sexual orientation, gender, and race, impact the meaning and practice of different types of rituals.

A serious limitation of our study is our inability to definitively determine whether our sample drew more upon past experiences of self, past experiences of peers, or more abstract cultural ideals and expectations, when giving a response. College students' expectations of gender roles in dating, sex, and romance change somewhat with greater experience (Bartoli & Clark, 2006). However, college students are also aware of discrepancies between men and women's expected roles in dating. We have no direct information on experiences that might impact young adults' interpretation of dating rituals or whether such interpretations vary systematically by race. Further study should assess the extent to which casual dating, serious dating, and hook-ups among racial/ethnic groups affect expected cues to a serious relationship, perhaps by comparing men and women who have not been in these types of relationship encounters to those who have some dating experience.

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Appendix 1

Self-rated Social Class Standing by Race (in Percent)

Class standing	Black	White	Total
Lower	5.2	0.5	2.5
Working	28.2	9.0	17.2
Lower-middle	21.0	9.5	14.4
Upper-middle	42.3	62.0	53.5
Upper	3.1	17.2	11.2
Elite	0.3	1.8	1.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding

Appendix 2

Religiosity by Race (in Percent)

Religiosity	Black	White	Total
Not at all religious (1)	1.7	12.9	8.1
2	4.8	23.1	15.3
3	39.5	29.6	33.8
4	39.2	23.7	30.3
Very religious (5)	14.8	10.8	12.5
Total	100	100	100

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics (N=680)

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Female	0.58	-	0	1
African American	0.43	-	0	1
Age	20.04	1.30	17	23
Religiosity	3.24	1.11	1	5
Dating experience	0.74	-	0	1
Perceived social class	3.57	1.02	1	6
Parent(s) with college education	0.56	-	0	1
Grew up with both Parents	0.30	-	0	1
Number of Siblings	1.77	1.28	0	6
Feels close to parents	0.53	-	0	1

Table 2

"What Activities Would Have to Occur For You to Consider a Person Your Boy/Girlfriend?" Percentages for Total Sample, by Gender and Race (N=680)

	By Gender		By Race				
	Total	Women	Men	Black	White		
Attend social activities	92.65	93.61	91.35	91.41	93.57		
Hang out with other's friends	67.94	71.36	†	63.32	62.89	†	71.72
Sexual intimacy	48.24	41.69	†	57.09	44.33	51.16	
Meet my family	57.06	58.31	55.36	72.16	†	45.76	
Meet his/her family	57.06	57.29	56.75	72.16	†	45.76	
Dress up and go out	54.56	54.48	54.67	54.64	54.50		
Buy affordable gifts	33.53	30.43	†	37.72	41.24	†	27.76
Buy expensive gifts	20.88	15.35	†	28.37	24.05	18.51	
Receive expensive gifts	21.47	17.90	†	26.30	26.46	†	17.74

Note:

† denotes significant group differences ($p < 0.05$).

Table 3

"What Activities Would Have to Occur For You to Consider a Person Your Boy/Girlfriend?" Comparison Across Subgroups

	Black		White	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Attend social activities	92.06	90.20	95.05	91.98
Hang out with other's friends	67.20	54.90	75.25	67.91
Sexual intimacy	33.86	63.73	49.01	53.48
Meet my family	75.13	66.67	42.57	49.20
Meet his/her family	74.60	67.65	41.09	50.80
Dress up and go out	57.67	49.02	51.49	57.75
Buy affordable gifts	40.21	43.14	21.29	34.76
Buy expensive gifts	17.99	35.29	12.87	24.60
Receive expensive gifts	22.75	33.33	13.37	22.46
<i>N</i>	189	102	202	187

Note:

[†] denotes significant gender differences within racial groups ($p < .05$). Shaded areas indicate significant racial differences within each gender ($p < .05$).

Table 4

Race and Gender Differences in Dating Rituals (Odds Ratios based on Logistic Regressions, N= 680)

	Hang out w. friends	Sexual Intimacy	Meet my family	Meet other family	Dress up and go out	Buy affordable gifts	Buy expensive gifts	Receive expensive gifts
Female	1.486* (2.29)	0.557** (3.54)	1.002 (0.01)	0.864 (0.86)	0.985 (0.09)	0.663* (2.39)	0.439** (4.12)	0.561** (2.94)
African American	0.595* (2.49)	1.035 (0.18)	2.141** (3.76)	2.137** (3.75)	0.852 (0.83)	1.787** (2.84)	1.461 (1.58)	1.863** (2.63)
Age	0.934 (1.03)	1.042 (0.65)	1.018 (0.27)	0.975 (0.38)	1.003 (0.05)	1.057 (0.85)	1.035 (0.45)	0.976 (0.32)
Religiosity	1.123 (1.41)	0.759** (3.53)	1.188* (2.19)	1.232** (2.65)	1.071 (0.91)	1.028 (0.34)	0.977 (0.24)	0.920 (0.89)
Perceived social class	0.943 (0.61)	1.029 (0.31)	0.783* (2.51)	0.908 (1.01)	1.110 (1.16)	1.079 (0.80)	1.022 (0.20)	1.101 (0.89)
Grew up with both parents	0.993 (0.04)	0.803 (1.15)	1.125 (0.59)	1.360 (1.55)	0.861 (0.80)	1.020 (0.10)	0.949 (0.23)	0.783 (1.07)
Number of siblings	0.889 (1.78)	1.244** (3.30)	0.991 (0.14)	0.966 (0.51)	1.027 (0.42)	0.966 (0.52)	1.108 (1.37)	1.065 (0.85)
Dating experience	1.356 (1.60)	1.370 (1.69)	0.687 (1.95)	0.727 (1.66)	0.918 (0.47)	0.944 (0.30)	0.773 (1.19)	0.957 (0.20)
Parent(s) with college education	0.957 (0.22)	1.362 (1.61)	0.827 (0.97)	0.692 (1.88)	0.602** (2.68)	0.757 (1.41)	0.920 (0.36)	0.734 (1.36)
Feels close to parents	0.887 (0.70)	0.980 (0.12)	1.325 (1.66)	1.176 (0.96)	0.864 (0.91)	0.945 (0.33)	0.773 (1.30)	0.871 (0.71)
BIC	-3531.643	-3472.192	-3508.849	-3507.989	-3436.568	-3519.215	-3694.414	-3678.019

Note:

* p<.05,

** p<.01

Table 5

Significant Group Differences in Odds of Dating Rituals (Odds Ratios based on Logistic Regressions)

	Black Women vs. Black Men	White Women vs. White Men	Black Women vs. White Women	Black Men vs. White Men
Hang out with other's friends				0.57 [†]
Sexual intimacy	0.31***			1.81 [†]
Dress up and go out				
Buy affordable gifts		0.52**	2.27***	
Buy expensive gifts	0.41**	0.47**		
Receive expensive gifts		0.53 [†]	1.95 [†]	
Meet my family			2.85***	
Meet his/her family			2.82***	

Note:

[†]
p .05,*
p .01,**
p .001

Numbers represent odds ratio of mentioning the dating ritual for the first group compared to the second group. Only relevant group contrasts are shown. Controls used in the models were age, religiosity, social class, living arrangement while growing up, experience with romantic relationships, parents' education, and closeness to parents. Due to the number of contrasts estimated, differences that are significant below the 0.01 level should be interpreted with caution.