



Black College Women and the Health of Black College Men

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand the influence Black college women have on the health behaviors of Black men. Using the Health Belief Model and the socioecological model as guides, focus groups and interviews were conducted with Black college men ($n = 35$) and Black college females ($n = 25$) at a Historically Black College and University in the Southern United States. Participants provided responses to questions on what impacts their health behaviors and whose health they influence. Results indicate that Black college men believed Black peer women influence decisions they make regarding their diet, physical activity, and general health behaviors. However, Black college women believe they only influenced physical activity and sexual health in Black college men. While they understood they had some influence on their health, the women were unsure if they had long-term influence. These findings highlight the need for programming that informs young Black women on the important role they play in the health of men in their lives, particularly young Black men. These findings also highlight the need for peer health educator training to cross-train educators on health issues of all gender groups.

Keywords College · Black women · Black men · Health influence

Introduction

Black males have the shortest life expectancy and the highest rate of premature mortality of any race by gender group in the US [1, 2]. Because risk behaviors in Black men vary by age group, it's important to have interventions and programs tailored toward different age groups and their risk behaviors [3]. In order to develop tailored interventions, we need to understand what and who influences health behaviors in Black men across the life course.

Research has reported that Black men with higher education have poorer health outcomes such as obesity and stress [4–6]. For this reason, Black college men are an important population to focus on to gain a better understanding of what health behaviors they engage in and what factors influence these behaviors. While research has reported on the negative health behaviors Black men in college engage in and

the barriers to them engaging in healthy behaviors, there is a lack of understanding on who influences the health behaviors of Black men in college [7, 8].

Peers, male and female, have been reported to be an integral part to improving the health of college men [9]. Research has noted that women do influence behaviors such as diet and physical activity in men [10, 11]. The influence of women has also been noted in research with married middle-aged Black men [12]. Because women and female peers appear to play integral roles in the health of men, it's important to understand the influence peer women have on the health behaviors of Black men across the life course [8]. Thus, this study seeks to add to the literature by investigating the specific role Black college women have on the health behaviors of Black college men. By understanding the influence Black women have on the health behaviors of Black men, trainings and programs can be developed to include peer women as key players toward improving the health of Black men in college. Additionally, there is a lack of research on the health behaviors and influences of Black males in college. Therefore, this study seeks to add to the literature by studying female influence in the health of Black men in college on a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) campus [8, 13]. The following research

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question guided this study: What role do Black college women have in the health of Black men in college?

Methods

This study employed a qualitative design using focus groups and in-depth interviews taken from two separate studies that collected data from Black male and Black female students at a HBCU in the southern United States. Inclusion criteria for participation in the study with Black males were: (1) currently enrolled in the university where the study was conducted during the fall 2015 term, (2) identify as African American or Black, and (3) identify as male. Inclusion criteria for participation in the study with Black females were: (1) currently enrolled in the university where the study was conducted during the spring 2017 term, (2) identify as African American or Black, and (3) identify as female. Before recruitment was conducted, IRB approval was obtained and received by Xavier University of Louisiana for this study.

Recruitment

Males

After receiving IRB approval, a list of emails (without student names) for all Black male students enrolled during the fall 2015 term were obtained. All Black male students received an email informing them a study looking at health behaviors in Black males needed participants. In this email, participants followed a link that allowed them to select three possible focus group dates. This email was sent out starting in October 2015 through November 2015. Participants were then emailed which date they were selected for. Participants were also sent reminders for their focus group the day before and the day of. To obtain additional participants, two focus groups were held in January and February 2016 with participants recruited through a convenience sample.

Females

After receiving IRB approval, participants were recruited by contacting other faculty on campus and having them distribute a flyer via email to their students and sending the flyer through the communication service used by student organizations on campus. This was done during the spring 2017 term. In recruitment communications, participants followed a link that allowed them to select three possible focus group dates. Participants were then emailed letting them know which date they were selected for. Participants were also sent reminders for their focus group day. To obtain additional participants, two additional focus groups and one

interview were held during the fall 2017 term with participants recruited via the same avenues.

Procedure

Males

Focus groups with Black males were conducted by the third author. The focus groups lasted no more than 1.5 h. Because initial recruitment involved participants selecting potential focus group dates, some focus groups didn't have enough participants show up; thus, some focus groups became in-depth interviews. Focus group questions were guided by the Health Belief Model (HBM) and previous work by the second author related to masculinity in Black men. The HBM was used because it suggests the likelihood of one engaging in a behavior based on perceived susceptibility, perceived severity, perceived barrier and benefits, and cues to action [14]. For the purposes of this paper, responses related to the HBM construct of cues to action were analyzed (Why do you engage in these behaviors?; How does being a man determine if you engage in these behaviors?).

Before all focus groups and interviews, informed consent was explained and received. Additionally, all participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire. All focus groups and interviews were recorded and transcribed by the second author and a research assistant. After all focus groups and interviews were conducted, each participant received a \$50 Wal-Mart gift card. They were unaware of the amount of the gift card or that they all would receive a gift card prior to their participation.

Females

Focus groups with the females were conducted by the second author and another female faculty member. The focus groups lasted no more than 1.5 h. Because recruitment involved participants selecting potential focus group dates, some focus groups didn't have enough participants show up; thus, one focus group became an in-depth interview. Focus group questions were guided by the socioecological model. This model was used because it provides an overall look at the different elements that impact health behavior [15]. For the purposes of this paper, responses related to the interpersonal level were analyzed (Whose health do you influence?).

Before all focus groups and interview with participants, informed consent was explained and received. Additionally, all participants completed a questionnaire that included demographic and health questions. Fourteen questions from the American College Health Association, National College Health Assessment were also used to gain general health behavior information [16]. All focus groups and interview were recorded. The first three focus groups were transcribed

using a transcription service. The last two groups and one interview were transcribed by two research assistants. For the first three focus groups, each participant received a \$100 Wal-Mart gift card after all groups were completed. The participants for the last two focus groups and one interview did not receive gift cards because there was no more grant funding. The participants who received gift cards were unaware of the amount of the gift card or that they all would receive a gift card prior to their participation so it is not believed this impacted the results.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted by the second author and two research assistants. All analysis was conducted by hand using a process of chunking and coding text for themes and sub-themes based on methods used by Griffith and colleagues [12, 17–21]. In the first step, each research assistant was given a transcript of a focus group or interview and asked to pull out chunks of data that related to a male participant's reference about women's influence on their health and a female participant's reference about who or what behavior they influence. The chunks of data had to stand on their own without the full transcript and had to explain either of the two areas mentioned above. For the second step, data from step one was checked by having another research assistant reviewed the document to ensure additional data chunks weren't missed. The third step involved having one research assistant combine all data chunks from steps 1 and 2 into two documents, one from male participant's on women's influence on health and one from female participant's on who or what behavior they influence. For the final step, both research assistants were given the two documents and asked to list elements that were similar across all data. After this step, the second author reviewed all documents to look for similar themes.

Results

There were a total of 60 participants (35 male and 25 female). Male participants included five focus groups and four interviews. Focus group participants consisted of one group of four, three groups of six, and one group of eight. Additionally, one interview included two participants. Most participants ranged in age from 18 to 25 years old with one participant being 34 years old. Participants represented all undergraduate and graduate levels at the university used in this study.

Female participants included five focus groups and one interview. Focus group participants consisted of one group of three, two groups of five, one group of four, and one group of seven. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 23 years old.

Participants represented all undergraduate levels at the university used in this study. Even though the male participants consisted of both undergraduate and graduate students and the female participants only included undergraduate students, the information on how women influence health and the level of influence women believe they have on health is valuable information to understand how to improve Black male health at all levels.

Female Influence on Health

Male participants mentioned their female peers (girlfriend, platonic friend, or female they're interested in) influenced their health behaviors in three main areas: Diet, Health Behaviors, and Physical Activity. While these influences mostly lead to positive health behaviors, they could also lead to negative health behaviors depending on the level of influence.

Diet

As it relates to diet, participants mentioned their female peers influenced their diet by what they eat or what they cook. Thus, if the females were eating healthy or cooked something healthy, the men would eat healthy. If the females were eating something that wasn't healthy or cooked something that wasn't healthy, the men would not eat healthy. As mentioned by one participant.

...like my girlfriend she eat healthy. So it's gone come on to me like eat more broccoli and what not. Come home, she got broccoli, I'm like 'uh' but I'm gone eat it though cause it's on my plate, you know what I'm saying.

Health Behaviors

Participants mentioned their female peers influenced their general health behaviors such as going to the doctor and making sure they stay in good general health. For many, females were the catalyst to making sure they stayed in good health. As mentioned by one participant.

...if I'm walking in the UC and I can't get a number it's just like what is going on. Cause some girls like you getting kinda fat. Let me hit up the RAC go play some ball. It's just like certain triggers that every man has that's gone trigger you to go make a healthier decision.

Physical Activity

In addition to influencing their general health, participants mentioned their female peers influenced their level of

physical activity. While the motive for engaging in physical activity may have not been for health reasons, engaging in physical activity is something that will improve their health if they stick with it.

...I feel like men exercise so they can be bigger than the next man or at least...so this girl will think like oh he look better than him, for sure.

Female Thoughts on Influence on Health

Female participants mentioned they believed they influenced overall physical health and sexual health. While they weren't sure if they had long term influence male health, they recognized they did have some initial or immediate influence in the areas mentioned above.

Physical Health

Female participants mentioned they have an influence on the general or overall health of their male peers. Some mentioned influencing physical activity and general health. As mentioned by two participants.

...ex-boyfriend, um, he was a little on the overweight side...I'd start working out and start caring about my health and I was just like if I'm getting fine you getting fine too...I was like come on and I used to, we used to...

...like with most black women like if they care about you like if you're a significant other or a friend, if they see that you're doing, you know something to keep yourself up, whether that be sexually, physically, what you eat then they're gonna follow suit.

Sexual Health

Participants mentioned they have some influence on the sexual health of their male peers as it relates to safe sex. With this influence, they mentioned how it could be positive or negative.

...we kind of influence on their sexual health as well um, imma use my best friend as an example, um, when she was with her ex-boyfriend, her ex-boyfriend was very adamant about using condoms and...when she said she didn't want to use one he was like okay, fine.

And I know guys who have gotten in relationships with girls and before like they wouldn't use condoms, they wouldn't have safe sex, but they got with that girl... when a girl really get into a guy's mind...I know a couple of guys who started using condoms because, oh my girl she wants to use them, so that's what we gone do.

Discussion

This study examined the influence Black college women have on the health of Black college men. While research does exist on the role Black women play in the health of Black men, this research is focused on married middle-aged Black men and their spouses. Considering the early onset of chronic conditions in the lifespan of Black men, it is important to understand the impact Black peer women (girlfriend, platonic friend, female they're interested in) have on the health behaviors of Black men across the lifespan. Understanding the influence Black peer women have on Black men in college may be beneficial to developing programs and interventions to improve the health behaviors of young Black men. The men in the study reported that Black peer women influenced their health decisions related to physical activity, dietary choices, and general health behaviors. Although they reported how influential Black college women were with these health behaviors, the women were not sure they had a lasting influence. Black college women reported their main influence was in the physical activity and in the sexual health of Black men.

Participants mentioned the influence women have on the physical health of Black men in college. While the male participants reported they engaged in physical activity so females will view them favorably in a physical manner, the females believed they influenced physical activity by pushing them to be physically active so they mirrored their physical activity. The idea that young men engage in physical activity to be physically attractive is similar to findings on research with men 18–25 in Australia which reported that sexual attractiveness was one motivator for physical activity among men 18–25 [10]. Additionally, female participants' belief they are helpful with initially motivating physical activity in Black men but may not have long term influence supports findings that male peer support and internal motivation were key factors to engaging in physical activity among middle-aged Black men [18, 20, 21].

Research on fruit and vegetable consumption in adults has reported that higher levels of social support led to increases in fruit and vegetable consumption which mirrors statements of our male participants who reported that peer females influenced their dietary behavior [11]. The men in the study reported they mirrored the dietary behavior of their female peers when deciding on their food choices. Additionally, they consumed food that was prepared for them by the women in their life (girlfriend, friend) even if they didn't like the food. This finding is similar to results with married middle-aged Black men reporting they go along with the food choices of their wives even if they disagree in order to maintain peace in

their marriages and social roles [12]. This finding reflects that Black men's dietary habits can be influenced by Black women they have a personal relationship with even if they aren't married to the women.

Female participants reported they believed they influenced the sexual health of the men in their life whether positive or negative. Participants mentioned they influenced condom use or non-use in a relationship by either requiring condoms be used or stating that not using condoms was fine. The idea that Black college women understand their influence in condom usage is similar to other research findings regarding condom negotiation and minority college women [22]. However, research has reported that Black college women might be more inclined to let Black men decide about condom use due to the smaller number of men on HBCU campuses [23]. Additional research has also reported that freshmen Black women have reported less frequent condom use [24].

Limitations

This study took place at a small HBCU which may have accounted for the low participant numbers. However, similar responses from focus groups conducted in different semesters shows that a level of saturation with the data was reached. Because participant numbers were low, findings may not be representative of all Black males and females at the university or generalizable to a larger group of Black college male and female students. Additionally, because campus dynamics are different at different campuses, the findings may have been different if students from other campuses were used in the study. Additionally, not understanding the specific role women in the study had in the lives of Black men may have led to missed information on what roles cause behavioral change in Black men. Evaluating the nature of roles and the importance of the peer relationships would lead to a stronger comprehension of the measure of Black women's influence in the health behaviors of Black men.

Conclusions

Even with increased awareness and treatment of preventable and chronic conditions, health outcomes for Black males still leave much to be improved [1]. Because Black men suffer from these conditions at higher rates, understanding the many factors that impact their health behaviors across the life course may be beneficial to decrease these health conditions and in turn improve the health disparity burdens experienced by Black men. Since Black men suffer from chronic health conditions at an earlier age, understanding who influences health behaviors in Black college men can be vital to reducing disease rates in middle-aged or older Black

men. Understanding who influences the health behaviors of Black college men can be beneficial to developing programs and interventions around improving health behaviors and outcomes in Black college men. This information may also be beneficial in making sure programs and interventions are tailored to include persons who may be integral and influential in determining which health behaviors Black college men engage in.

Implications

This study provides insight into the role Black college women play in the health behaviors of Black men. Findings from this study have implications for college health promotion and wellness programs. College health professionals can use findings to develop peer wellness counselor trainings and programs that cross train counselors on health issues of all genders so that they can develop and deliver programs for all students on campus. Additionally, college health professionals at HBCUs should develop health events for males and females separately and together. Because peer influence can come from different groups, providing avenues where groups can interact with each other together and separately may be important in influencing healthy behaviors in all groups. It may also be important for college health professionals to inform students about the role they may play in developing and shaping the health behaviors and outcomes of their peers.

Recommendations

Future research in this area should examine the role and influence other females (mother, aunt, grandmother, sister, etc.) have on the health behaviors of Black men in college. Research should also examine the influence Black men have on the health behaviors of Black college men. Because this research was conducted at one HBCU, future research should examine if these concepts are true for Black men and women on other college campuses.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest No other conflicts exist for the other authors.

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