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Something New

A Scholarly Review and Clinical Perspective of Black Online Dating

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ABSTRACT—For many busy and transient Black professionals, online dating may seem like a viable social option yet qualitative inquiry in a clinical setting revealed apprehensiveness to meeting potential partners on the internet. Perceived personal barriers included an interest in dating others who were similar (e.g., homogamy) in class, race, and/or religion. An exploration of quantitative research findings supports the broad existence of these perspectives among some Black professionals. Economic considerations, such as the cost of computers and online dating memberships, are also outlined as potential barriers. Additionally, soft research techniques (e.g., internet search results describing a topic subjectively, culturally, or opinion-based) were implored to fill the gap left by the limited hard research on the process of online dating, the challenges associated with its use (e.g., discrimination, digital deception), and the cultural norm differences in face-to-face versus online dating. Research on online dating is growing but minimal attention has been given to the experiences of Blacks who might be increasingly utilizing these social networking tools. The present paper examines these perceptions in the context of the sparse literature on Black online dating. Implications for future research and recommendations for Black online daters are provided.

KEY WORDS—Black online dating, social networking, social homogamy

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A S A LICENSED CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST AND ACADEMIC RE-searcher with nearly a decade of experience, I can attest that there is consistent evidence of the importance of establishing social support for clinical clients. In fact, research demonstrates that social support improves mental health outcomes (e.g., depression and anxiety) (Resick, 2001; Taylor, 2011; Travis, 2004). As a Black therapist, I am often privy to the parameters and limitations of developing such networks for Black professionals. Most notably, professionals tend to be geographically transient, often finding themselves in cities where diversity is scarce or the pool of diverse professionals is perceived to be limited. Busy lifestyles are also a significant contributing factor impacting the pursuit of social outlets. Moreover, my professional clients report low availability of similar others and negative online interactions. Though the realities of restricted dating prospects persist, many of my clients refuse to utilize contemporary technology, such as online dating, to broaden their prospect pool.

The present paper supplements the conversation about diversity in online dating with a particular emphasis on Black professionals. Gaining a new understanding of online dating amongst Blacks is crucial, due to the increase in popularity of this method (Smith & Duggan, 2013), which could have the potential to drastically change the cultural norms of dating/courtship and relationships (e.g., friendships and romantic relationships). In addition, researching Black online dating is a benefit to the users and providers of this contemporary social engagement by understanding and providing tools to overcome the perceived barriers. We use social homogamy theory, described in numerous studies (e.g., Kalmijn, 1998; Trost, 1967) in this clinical and scholarly perspective to examine the difficulties Blacks face while using online dating sites. Social homogamy suggests that individuals are more likely to date/marry others with similar characteristics. These could include, but are not limited to, socioeconomic, racial, religious, or even cultural similarities. For some Black professionals, finding a mate with such similarities may be perceived as difficult. There exists the possibility that if Black professionals were to use online dating to expand the pool of potential mates, then their selections may be more likely to in accordance with desired traits and qualities. In this essay, we first describe the process of online dating, followed by a discussion of barriers in Black online dating, and conclude with recommendations for clinicians, online daters, and future research.

Online Dating

Compared to the newspaper personal advertisements that were used in the past, the use of online personal ads is rapidly growing. Researchers have found that over 40 million individuals visited these ads in 2003 (Mulrine, 2003) though upwards of 90% of profile are inactive (Hong, 2013). In 2013, the digital dating service industry reached $2 billion in revenue. The major dating sites include Match, OKCupid, and eHarmony (IBISWorld, 2013). All online dating websites share the common goal of connecting compatible people for the purpose of meeting and dating. This is accomplished through a series of components that are consistent to all online dating sites. These components include a self-description or profile made by users; users viewing descriptions of others; and users making interpersonal connections whether online or potentially in person (Rocco Tresolini Fiore, 2004).

The self-description typically includes key demographic and personal questions such as gender, age, ethnicity, number of children, education, and body type. Once a profile is created, users can search for others and sort by a specific type of person. Often, the dating systems will also select potential *matches* and suggest them to the user through matching algorithms (Rocco Tresolini Fiore, 2004).

Online dating is often stigmatized as a resource for desperate people and viewed as a socially awkward exchange (Ahuvia & Adelman, 1992; VanAllen, n.d.). Contrary to this idea, contemporary results show that such stigmatizations may not hold true. Users are no longer lonely, introverted individuals who have difficulty in social interactions. Instead, users of these sites represent a more broad range of individuals (Ahuvia & Adelman, 1992). Online dating can also be stigmatized in ethnic minority populations. Some minority, especially women, users perceive that online dating leads to more positive experiences (e.g., meeting possible mates) for White people (Ashleigh, 2014; Young, 2011). In spite of the stigma, the diversity in ethnicity has increased in many online social environments.

Despite an upward trend in use, some Blacks are reluctant to use social networking. A sense of mistrust and possibly a stigma exists among some Blacks towards online dating (Ashleigh, 2014; VanAllen, n.d.; Young, 2011). Some common undercurrents between the two may be the fear of sharing too much with strangers and questioning the effectiveness of both therapeutic and dating strategies. Online dating advocates argue that online dating broadens the dating pool beyond chance public encounters (McGraw, 2005). The pros and cons of meeting people online are still hotly debated by the media and potential online daters. However, despite its prevalence, lit-

tle research has been done on cyber-courtship and cyber friendships. This is especially true for users of color, in this case, Black professionals. In fact, a literature search of online dating yielded few results specifically including Black participants.

Black Myths and Online Dating

Scholarly and lay discourse frequently enforces ideas of dating scarcity for Black professionals. These messages report statistics that 42–70% of Black women have never been married (ABC News, 2009; Kreider & Ellis, 2011), that education decreases the chances of getting married (Alexander, 2009; Young, 2010), and that successful Black men prefer White women (Davis, 2009; Young, 2010). Researchers, Toldson and Marks, reexamined the census data that yielded these results through a different lens (Desmond-Harris, 2011). After excluding those not likely to be married, Toldson and Marks found that that 75% of Black women married by age 35. Baccalaureate education actually increased the odds of being married from 60% to 70% for Black females 40 and under. For Black males, marriage increased from 63% to 76% when compared to individuals with a high school education. Even further, 88% of all Black men were wedded to a Black woman regardless of their education or salary. It is also noteworthy that much of the research on Black relationships omits same sex relationships and those who report being single. Despite these omissions and contradictory research findings, anecdotally, the myths of the aforementioned Black relationship statistics prevail.

While some Blacks are turning to online dating websites to find a mate, others are still reluctant. Dating sites that are aimed at persons of African descent like BlackSingles.com and BlackPeopleMeet.com indicate that there is a rise in the number of Black women using their sites, though no specific data was provided. Though Blacks are reportedly increasing their online presence, many barriers to online dating still exist including a desire for social homogamy (e.g., a mate of a similar race, complexion, social class, and religion), undesirable online behavior, and access disparities.

Social Homogamy Theory

Social homogamy theory suggests that people are attracted to others who are similar. By definition, homogamy has been suggested as an expression of

same-sex relationships and "heterogamy" in heterosexual couples, but classic uses of the former term persists in male-female relationships research (Cohen, 2011). People typically select mates who are similar to themselves in appearance, age, race, religion, education, and socio-economic status (Cohen, 2011; Watson, Beer, McDade-Montez, 2014). Further, people make choices based on shared interests and role expectations. Notably, Watson and colleagues (2014) found that agreeableness, emotional stability, intellect, and attractiveness outweighed religious and political preferences. Thus, the aspects of homogamy that are perceived to be most salient remain debatable.

The concept of social homogamy can be dissected into various components. The three major areas examined here include class (e.g., socioeconomic status, education), race, and religion. Evidence suggests that people are interested in dating individuals of a similar economic class (Sprecher & Regan, 2002). Racial matching preferences occur on an interracial and intra-racial level and religious homogamy is also evident. In addition, any combination of the aforementioned matching preferences adds to the complexity of dating preferences.

Socioeconomics and Homogamy

In Graham's controversial (2000) book, *Our Kind of People: Inside Black America's Upper Class*, he outlines the continued economic segregation within the race. The Black elite, those making over $200,000 annually, make up less than 1% of the Black population. Often consisting of physicians, lawyers, businessmen and women, he notes a continual emphasis among the Black elite on the "right" skin tone, family, schools, and social clubs often at the exclusion of lower and middle class Blacks. Yet these "preferences" for the right mate seem to extend into the middle class.

For professional Black women seeking other professionals, the perceived obstacles continue with educational differences between the genders. The U.S. Department of Education (2012) reported that men earned 34% of bachelor's degrees awarded to Blacks in 2009. Employment status may also be a deciding factor for Black professionals. Given the current state of the economy and its disproportionate impact on Blacks compared to Whites (Desilver, 2013), unemployment and underemployment may be legitimate concerns. Social class is often based on perception and misperception of education, income, or social activities that may cause daters to unduly eliminate dating prospects.

In my clinical practice, some of my clients report desiring a "professional" mate though no clear definition is provided. For some, obtaining a college degree is important, while for others, it is maintaining full time job. One professional in her mid-30's, said, "I just want someone who I can take to professional events and he can go one way while I go another and I do not have to worry about him embarrassing me." The expectation is that another professional will be able to exercise independence and have a sense of social awareness/sensitivity.

Just as Watson et al. (2014) found in their study with college students, the prevailing clinical theme is that clients report a preference for someone who is similar to themselves. Socioeconomic and educational preferences are often cited first among Black professionals, but are quickly followed by racial and religious predilections.

Racial Homogamy

Dating prospects may be further limited by the avoidance of interracial dating and colorism (e.g., prejudice based on social ascription of skin tone value) (Duke & Berry, 2012; Lewis, 2013). Based on one's racial identity and the sense of belonging and identification with a particular group (Phinney, 1989), the race/ethnicity of a potential mate may range from extremely important to irrelevant.

Interracial dating has doubled in the last 30 years. Over 15 % of all new marriages are between individuals of a different race compared to 8% of existing marriages (Passel, Wang, & Taylor, 2010; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Interracial relationships are on an upward trend yet online daters still show preferences for same race matches (Lewis, 2013). Hitsch, Hortaçsu, and Ariely (2010) found that regardless of age, income, and education, most online daters prefer to date within their race. Some groups are more open to interracial matches (Mendelsohn, Shaw Taylor, Fiore, Cheshire, 2014). Some of these groups more open to interracial matches include Blacks more than Whites; males more than females; and younger people compared to older people. Other research found that people were less likely to initiate contact with a user of a different race but were more apt to respond when contact was initiated (Lewis, 2013). Lewis extrapolates from these trends that preemptive discrimination is often the culprit. This form of discrimination is based upon the expectation of negative interactions that may have occurred in prior life experiences with racism and oppression.

Similarly 'cultural paranoia' accounts for the expectation of how people of other races will treat you based on past experiences (Grier & Cobbs, 1968). Beyond interracial dating preferences, skin tone preferences still exist in Black communities (Duke & Berry, 2012).

Colorism is still evident in many Black social exchanges. *Dark Girls* (Duke & Berry, 2012) is a contemporary documentary film on the issue of colorism. The film explores the intersection of class, race, and self-esteem and it also highlights the continued within-race prejudice. The documentary reveals that many Black participants indicated a preference to date other Blacks with similar skin tones. Even further, throughout their commentaries, some participants perpetuated negative perceptions of Blacks of other skin tones. These sustained ideologies may limit intraracial dating prospects. People with strong race-based preferences may also hold other preferences that could impact their online interpersonal connections, such as religious homogamy.

Religious Homogamy

Religion and spirituality are often salient values in the Black community. People often seek relationships with people of the same religious background with the assumption that religious compatibility is essential to romantic success. There are even dating websites dedicated to Christian daters (e.g., Christianmingle) and specific religions (e.g., JDate, Catholicsingles, BlackAdventistSingles). While some perceive a baseline level of comfort with shared religious affiliation, others may find minimal success with such a narrow scope of potential partners. When discussing religion and online dating, a 45 year old, Black male client said, "I go to church but am not super religious. Many [Black] women online ask too many questions about what church I belong to or what denomination I am." Similarly, another male client asserted, "I do not want to be beaten over the head with the bible."

CNN contributor Liane Membis (2010) explored one blogger's suggestion that Black women are sometimes "blinded" by strict adherence to religious beliefs fashioned by Black churches. The religious term "equally yoked" is translated into equally extensive time and participation in church activities. Prospects met outside of church are often immediately disregarded, which may further limit dating opportunities. Alternatively, others suggest that Christian Black women are single because there are fewer Black

men in church (i.e.,1 in 5 have no religious associations) and that men are less willing to assume a "submissive" role under the pastoral leadership of another man (Membis, 2010). The necessity of religious homogamy may seem farfetched but research finds support for improved marital outcomes (Cornwall & Thomas, 1990; Curtis & Ellison, 2002; Schramm, Marshall, Harris, & Lee, 2012).

Cornwall and Thomas (1990) examined the Mormon religion and marriage and found that couples that attended church regularly reported higher marital satisfaction and commitment attributable to adherence to religious guidelines and the social support found within the congregation. Regular attendance in non-denominational or denominational church has a two-fold effect of close social support and the fear of stigmatization if a couple separated (Schramm, Marshall, Harris, & Lee, 2012). Additionally, Curtis and Ellison (2002) found greater consensus on family issues among couples who choose religious homogamy. Religion and values are often intertwined and online daters may have an expectation of shared values and appropriate online behavior.

Undesirable Online Behaviors

Sexual innuendo is very prevalent in face-to-face and online dating. Nonverbal cues like hand gestures, eye contact, posture, and other forms of body language are lost during cyber courtship and dating. Thus, online daters are relegated to profile pictures and written narrative to elicit attraction. Moreover, the anonymity of online dating likely reduces inhibitions of people and written communication produces a fabricated sense of personal familiarity (Hong, 2013). Many females report sexual innuendo too early in online dating connections (Dating Goddess, 2010). Examples range from provocative answers to profile questions such as "what do you think is sexy" to direct references to one's sexual prowess. Unless sites are designated for "hook-ups" (e.g., casual sexual encounters), early sexual advances sometimes derails future face-to-face and intimate encounters.

In live dating, there is no running commentary on the internal dialogue of a prospect. However, online dating is unique in that it allows users to post comments, "poke" (i.e., to say hello or show interest; Wickman, 2014), or "wink" (i.e., a sign of flirtation). Comments, in particular, can prove deleterious to online users. Sexist and racist commentary is boldly declared under the guise of "preferences" perhaps without recognizing the impact on the

human recipient. Willoughby (2014) blogged about the hazards of online dating for Black women expounding on the endless reminders of our perceived unattractiveness, such as users making guessing games out of her ethnicity and suggesting she be more physically fit. Hong (2013) proposes that the flood of matches causes users to quickly filter based on trivial rather than meaningful perceptions. Given this high negativity, it is no wonder many of my clients avoid online dating. If clients already experience personal struggles, additional online negative comments are not the antidote. Perhaps fear of negative evaluation drives online daters to deception.

Deception and Perceived Deception in Online Dating

Upon direct questioning about perceived *digital deception* (knowingly transmitting false information), one mid-40's, Black female professional stated, "You can be whomever you want online, I could never trust them." Another client insisted, "it's too easy to lie online." On the surface, the research supports their position. In fact, 81% of people do not accurately describe themselves online (Toma, Hancock, Ellison, 2008) and a third of online data photographs are not accurate (Hancock & Toma, 2009). Women are more likely to post inaccurate pictures that are older, enhanced/professional, or are inconsistent with their present appearance (i.e., hair color, weight), while men are more likely to lie about height. Additionally, some users of dating websites are also deceptive about their relationship status (e.g., single and unattached). Deception on the Internet is so prevalent that new terms, trolling and catfish, have now been used to describe people who use the Internet for fraud, deception, or bullying (Buckels, Trapnell, & Paulhus, 2014).

At a glance, deception seems quite rampant but it is notable that humans also frequently lie in face-to-face interactions. Some people will make changes to hair color, eye color, get cosmetic procedures, and use body-shaping garments. Inasmuch, others may lie about their name or other personal information in awkward social interactions. Generally, people lie about once or twice a day in face-to-face communication (DePaulo et al., 1983; Hancock, Thom-Santelli, & Ritchie, 2004). It could be surmised that fears about deceit on the Internet are disproportionate with reality.

Online, the decision to be untruthful is more common than fraud. Some lies are perceived as "safer" in the event that users meet in person. Researchers even suggest that some amount of dishonesty is socially acceptable in the online dating arena and that in some cases it may serve as

inspiration to blend the ideal online self with real self (Ellison, 2006). The moral boundary between protecting one's identity and intentional deception is unclear. Clinically, I frequently suggest to my clients that the best way to reveal and uncover the truth is through communication and meeting in person sooner rather than later.

The challenges with online dating are complex and multilayered and there are no universal answers to address all of the implicit and explicit expectations with online dating. One problem that has not heretofore been discussed is disparities in Internet access in Black communities both on broad-band internet and mobile devices (Horrigan, 2009; Smith, 2014). These access disparities do not exist among high income and college educated Blacks and is more prevalent in individuals who are older and low income (Smith, 2014). Since Blacks are represented across the economic spectrum, the present discussion is briefly broadened to consider the implications of access disparities in online dating.

Financial Implications in Black Online Dating

Fewer Black households have Internet access (62%) at home compared to 74% of Whites (Smith, 2014). Despite plummeting prices for computers and Internet, the high cost often accounts for the absence of a computer. Infrequent access likely influences computer literacy, which further reduces the utility of online dating systems. This also limits the pool of eligible singles. Over the years some of my clients have reported low computer literacy, grammatical errors, and/or Internet slang is often perceived as a red flag in the online world. Both older and younger users should be aware of these opinions to avoid misperceptions.

Internet dating also costs money and time. Membership fees often cost hundreds of dollars per year. Using one or more of these sites can become costly. Deals are often advertised such as a free trial week but the fine print may require lump sum payments or automatic renewal. Premium services such as private calling or profile development assistance might be tempting but also add to the cost (Lacy, 2010).

A cost-benefit comparison of the value of time may also be useful. An hourly wage estimate applied to the number of hours spent on dating websites may reveal an imbalance and may not justify the cost. Assessing one's general use of time is relevant too. The estimated time to create a profile ranges from five minutes to an hour (Lacy, 2010). Having enough free time to create profile, look at other profiles, contact others, and date all add to

an already complex work/life balance for professionals. It is pertinent to consider whether online dating is the best use of time and money.

Economic considerations such as computer costs may not be as relevant for Black professionals but the cost-benefit assessment of time versus money is necessary. Moreover, time constraints are universal as few people have excessive free time to spend in cyber communications. Lastly, understanding barriers to access may be salient for the broader audience and for future research considerations.

We have thoroughly described the process, challenges, benefits, and perceptions of Black online dating. The next section provides a case for future research and recommendations for potential online daters.

Implications and Recommendations

As online dating is emerging as a new research arena, special attention should be paid to potential Black online daters. The unique needs and perspectives of this growing subgroup can add to the sparse literature on online dating. Perhaps cultural considerations can be made in the development of matching algorithms. There may also be distinctive needs that users of color may find beneficial; for example, the ability to narrow a search by religion or education preferences, to filter out inappropriate (e.g., racist, prejudice) content, to report negative user behavior, or an express profile creation option. Research including Black users would provide more insight into the needs and adaptions that would be most beneficial.

Online dating may also be a useful tool for clinicians. Therapists should be knowledgeable about specific social support resources that are available to their clients both regionally and through the Internet. A quick google search for "online dating" yields over 11 million results but narrowing searches by client characteristics (e.g., race, religion, interpersonal needs) may provide more useable results. Assisting clients in using technology to identify social outlets and to make social connections may help them meet their therapeutic goals. Knowing the barriers and having the ability to suggest solutions may make this tool more beneficial.

This paper primarily focused on the pros and cons of online dating. We surmise that natural human flaws are replicated in technological mediums. Despite the challenges, online dating may remain a practical alternative to meeting people in the community. For those considering and using online dating sites, a few recommendations are offered to overcome the obstacles addressed in this paper:

- Establish whether there is a desire to fill a short-term need (e.g., dating) versus a long-term commitment (e.g., cohabitation, marriage). Dating needs may include companionship and social outlets whereas marriage requires love, financial considerations, and a needs assessment for future partnership (Blackwell & Lichter, 2004). In dating, complete compatibility is not required and people have the option to try "something new." Dating may be more expansive if one is amendable to meeting people with different characteristics. It is noteworthy that some online applications, like Tinder.com, are perceived to be for hook-ups. Conduct background research on the various sites and ask friends with similar interests for recommendations.

- Weigh the time/cost equation of online dating. One should consider the amount of time and financial investment required to date online before taking on this additional responsibility. If time and resources are limited, one may want to consider low cost or free community events to engage in to meet others.

- Internet dating may be costly, but keep in mind that some paying members may be more serious about establishing friendships and/or committed relationships.

- Monitor time appropriately. It is easy to lose track of time and/or spend too much time in the process of creating and searching profiles on dating sites. Set limits and balance online activities with live human interactions.

- Believe nothing that is heard and half of what is seen. One should be cautious and not perpetuate deception in his/her profile. It should be kept in mind that deception is very prevalent on the Internet and it may be imprudent to emotionally invest in online relationships without meeting users in person early on.

- Avoid sharing too much personal information too soon. Pay attention to suspicious behavior such as few connections, absent or professional photos, alleged traumatic injuries or serious illnesses, inaccessibility at certain hours, or unwillingness to video chat or talk by phone.

- Use websites that target demographic interests (e.g., BlackPeople-Meet.com, ChristianMingle.com, OurTime.com). Be clear about what the site offers and whether or not it is aligned with personal expectations.

- Use technology for purposes other than dating. Online search tools can connect people with social, community, and religious events that target intended demographic groups. These events may include professional socials, alumni meetings, concerts, athletic events, book clubs, or holiday festivals.

- Stay safe when taking the next step! Many online dating platforms list tips for protecting yourself, both on and offline. One should take certain precautions during the first meeting with someone. Some precautions include meeting in a public place, use of own personal or public transportation; alerting a friend of family member about where the date will be and who it will be with; and remaining sober.

Summary

Creating a robust social support network is a significant buffer to the effects of psychological distress. Online dating and networking may be a viable tool to broaden social outlets. While there may be an increase in social options, there are many perceived obstacles. This paper sought to provide assistance for successfully navigating these barriers thereby expanding social prospects. The diversity of users will continue to increase and research on effectiveness of this tool will surpass individual anecdotes of negative personal experiences of Black online dating.

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